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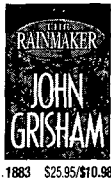
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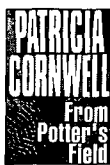
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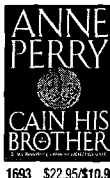
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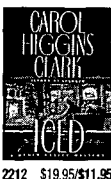
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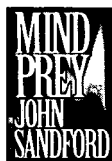
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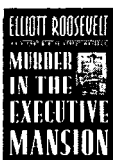
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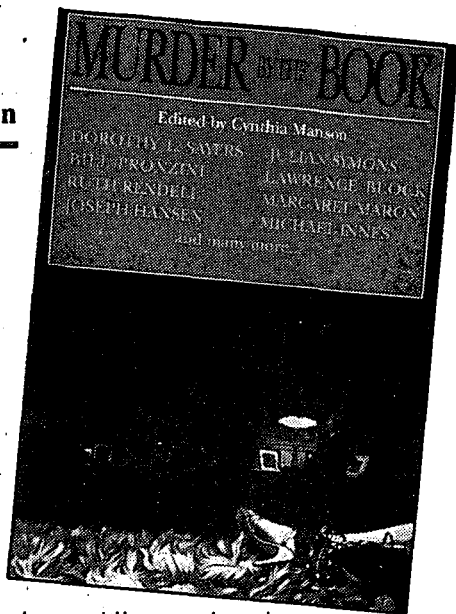


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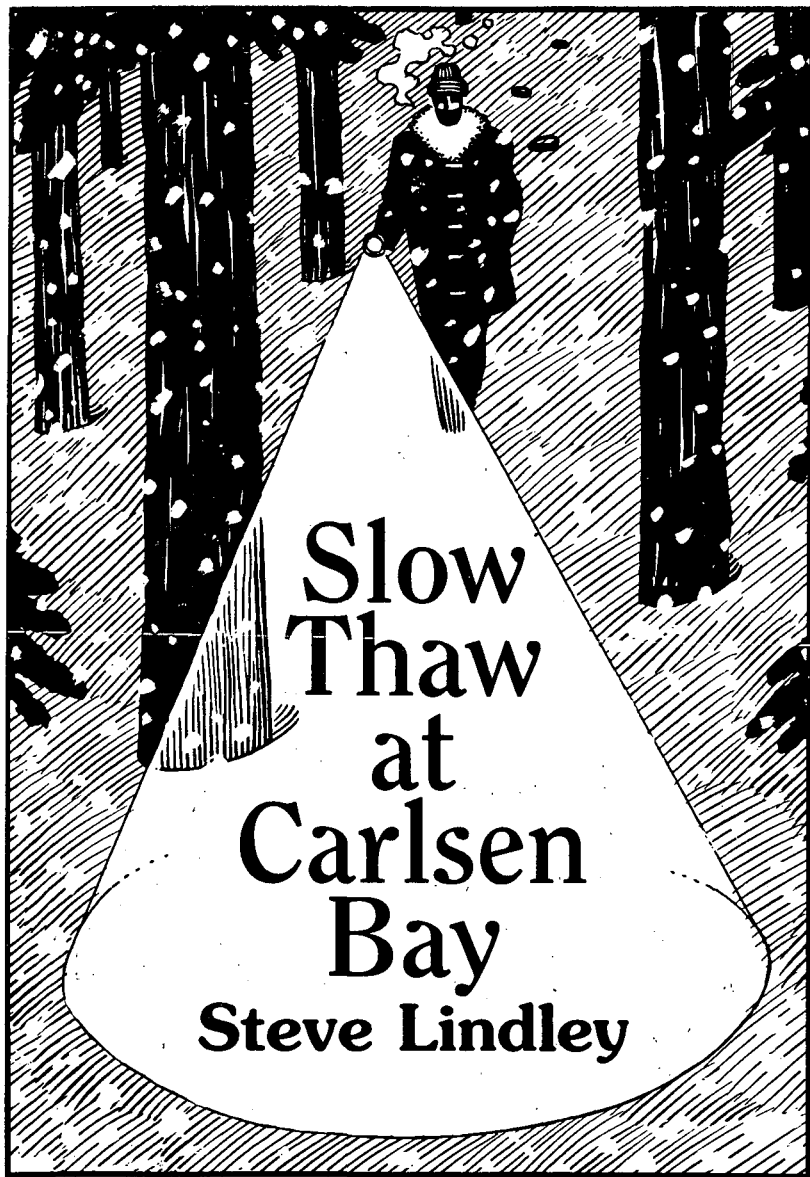
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**T**hat his daughter and the boy had chosen the harshest weekend of the winter on which to marry had, to Kubiak, seemed reason enough to postpone the event. Then the cold front pressed the storm below them through central and south Wisconsin, forcing the interstate closed.

"February is always the roughest month on Lake Superior," David Hollinger, the groom-to-be, had said. "But this season has been so unusually mild until now. Bad luck, I guess." This had been Friday morning. A meeting was held in Hollinger's cabin. The closing of the roads would affect the bride's party, as Maria's friends and relatives planned to drive up from Chicago on Saturday. Would the roads be reopened by then? Possibly. Phone calls would have to be made in any case. Whether or not the show would go on was left up to the bride. Maria determined it would: Friday night bachelor party, Saturday night rehearsal dinner, Sunday wedding.

Then the best man turned up dead. Frozen dead.

More bad luck? Or something worse? Kubiak hadn't said it, had merely raised one eyebrow, but that had been enough. His wife and daughter were familiar with that eyebrow and its language.

"Never can stop being a cop," Denise had said, though he had, without regret, from a career in Latent Prints no less. Odd hours, but offering the safety and security he believed a man's family demanded.

"Cold, emotionless fish," Maria had blubbered before storming out the door followed by his wife, from whom she had learned the phrase.

So he was left alone again to pace his tiny cabin in his boots and coat and that silly hat Hollinger had given him, the one with the flaps. "Your standard fedora won't work up here, Mr. Kubiak. With the right wind chill, you could lose both ears to frostbite in under five minutes." Late afternoon Saturday and the temperature outside the cabin was fifteen below, wind chill minus sixty, a guaranteed five minute ear froster. Inside didn't feel much more comfortable, the only source of heat being a woodburning stove fighting valiantly, hopelessly, against the wind squeezing through the gaps in the tiny windows. Occasionally the cabin's walls or roof would contract yet again, sounding a heavy snap.

As he added more wood to the fire, his eyes landed on the table beside the bottom bunk. He took off one mitten and picked up the wedding card that lay

beneath Denise's paperback. "The Beginning of a New Life," the face announced on a background of flowers and lace. Inside was the poem Denise had liked along with that convenient pocket in which the check had been tucked. With numb fingers he extracted the check. Best not to leave it lying around, a sum of ten thousand dollars made out to David and Maria Hollinger. With love. From Mom and Dad.

Funny. He hadn't thought twice when Denise had taken his name so long ago. Now it seemed unfair that Maria was about to toss it away. Perhaps he was being selfish, but to see the proud name of Kubiak relegated to maiden name status was almost insulting. Maiden name, indeed. What a ludicrous term. For that matter, the wedding ritual itself was nothing but a . . .

He was placing the check securely in his wallet when Denise reentered the cabin. To her, this might have been his final act of outrage, but to Kubiak it was just one more nasty incident in a weekend full of the same.

He and Denise had arrived at Carlsen Bay Thursday at dusk, an eight hour drive from Chicago. David and Maria met them in front of the line of cabins, Hollinger politely waiting two

steps back while the Kubiaks greeted their daughter. Upon being introduced, the boy gave Denise as much of a hug as their thick coats would allow, then removed his right glove and shook Kubiak's hand with a hearty, "I imagine you could use a drink."

Not a bad beginning. In fact, it was so on the mark Kubiak suspected Maria had been doing some coaching.

They had dinner a half mile away at the Sunset Inn, where Maria had worked over the summer. There were eight of them alone at a round table in the center of the dining room, very much alone as the Sunset Inn was closed for the season and those at the table composed the entire population of the Carlsen Bay area. The three Kubiaks sat together with David Hollinger at Maria's right and Mike Losito, his best man, on his other side. Next to Losito were Karl Carlsen and his thirty-year-old son Joseph, and beside them sat Pat Wallis, the inn's owner, who had opened it solely for this weekend, the wedding. He had prepared the meal and had served it before joining them at the table.

The New York strip was tender. The conversation could have been duller. Still, Kubiak couldn't shake an eerie feeling caused by the way their words

were swallowed in the room's empty corners, reflecting the oppressive remoteness of this part of the country.

Wallis must have picked up on his unease. "The decorations go up tomorrow. Dance floor along that wall. The room is the perfect size for your reception. We still have a final count of forty?"

Kubiak shrugged. Denise was making the arrangements.

After dinner Wallis suggested they move to the banquet room, which was prepared for Saturday's rehearsal dinner. "The bar is set up. And we can have a smoke." Denise, Maria, and Hollinger declined, anxious to solidify Sunday's details. The rest followed Wallis.

It was a small banquet room, paneled in pine. Wallis went behind the bar and poured Rémy Martin into snifters, offered cigars from a humidor. Kubiak took one, thanked him, though he was certain it would show up on Sunday's bill. The Carlsens leaned on the bar and joined in a toast offered by Mike Losito, Hollinger's partner and best friend.

Losito was maybe twenty-two, tall, thick-chested, blond, with a robustness surpassing even Hollinger's if that was possible. Of all of them in the room, he was the last Kubiak would have foreseen lying dead on a

table in Cabin 5 in fewer than thirty-six hours.

"David is anxious to show you the land we're buying," he said to Kubiak after draining his glass. "I suppose Maria has told you all about it."

"Bits and pieces. None of the particulars."

"Really? I find that amazing."

Did he? Kubiak couldn't imagine why, though when the cognac makes its way to the cheeks much of the world becomes amazing. He turned to Karl Carlsen. "How long have you owned it?"

"Since the first Carlsen settled here and named it for himself. Generations."

"So, why sell now?"

"To make something of it, of course. The name will remain." He slapped the arm of his son, who seemed to be paying no attention. "Isn't that right, Joseph?"

"Land isn't gold," the younger Carlsen told the liquor in his glass. He had inherited his father's stocky build but not his exuberance. "Gold is gold."

"Thirty thousand dollars," Losito said, a little too heartily. Kubiak tried to recall how much wine the boy had consumed at dinner. "The art of negotiation. Everyone is supposed to win. But you'll see all this tomorrow morning. We're heading up to Carlsen Bay proper at six."

\*

"Six A.M.," Kubiak grumbled up at the bottom of his wife's mattress. "Incredible country." The beds were too tiny for two. He had offered the top bunk to Denise, as what little heat the cabin retained settled high. "A girl drives to the outback to visit a friend over the summer, winds up being swept away by Lewis and Clark."

"I wish you'd taken more time to talk to David."

"About what? Flower arrangements? If he's so interested in the aspects of the wedding, why didn't we have a real one in Chicago where there are reception halls and streets and heat? He has no family here."

"It's where they met, where they're planning to live. I like the idea, and I like him. I like his friends. What did you call that Losito boy?"

"Robust."

"Yes."

"Anybody who polishes off a bottle of red and eight ounces of brandy at a sitting and is up at six the next morning . . . By the way, were you aware that gold is gold?"

The bed above him creaked. A hand dropped down, found his, and squeezed. Sweet Denise. With all that was on her mind, she still found a bit of herself to offer him comfort.

Then again, she might have been searching for his throat.

**T**he Jeep Grand Cherokee was warming at six when Kubiak emerged from his cabin into the frigid morning air. Hollinger was behind the wheel. The Carlsens sat in the second row of seats. Mike Losito was in the back. The front passenger seat had been reserved for the tourist of honor. Kubiak climbed in, and that was when Hollinger handed him the hat, along with a lecture.

"I forgot to mention this last night. I don't know if you're in the habit of taking long walks, but I wouldn't venture far from the cabins if I were you, especially at night. The weather up here is beyond brutal. At times it's dangerous."

Kubiak fiddled with the ridiculous looking hat as the Jeep wound through forest, bouncing along two ruts in the snow that might have covered a road of some sort.

"Right now," Hollinger said, not taking his eyes off the path, "what Mike and I own are our two charter fishing boats, those cabins we're staying in and the land they're on, and two of these babies." He patted the Grand Cherokee's dash. "All your Lake Superior charter fishing in this state comes out of



ports around Chequamegon Bay and west. But we dock our boats east here at tiny Carlsen Bay, which isn't even a bay, really, just a little pier in the middle of nowhere, cut off by the Bad River Indian Reservation. Four years ago, people thought we were crazy. What they didn't consider is that we're only an hour and a half drive north from Minoqua."

"Location, location," Losito called out from the back.

"It gives us access to an entirely different group of tourists, and the Minoqua area is jammed with them all summer. They see our brochures and ads, we transport them up here in the Jeeps. They're on Lake Superior by nine A.M., back in their hotel rooms by five. Nobody does it but us, and once we own Carlsen Bay and its docking privileges, we're guaranteed a monopoly."

They entered a clearing, and Hollinger stopped the Jeep. "It's still a walk from here," he said, glancing at Kubiak. "What do you think, Mike? See if we can get closer?"

"I don't know," Losito said. "It's been a mild season."

"Feels solid enough. Besides, if we do get stuck, there are enough of us here to get us out. I'll try Section B."

Hollinger put the Jeep back into gear, slowly maneuvered

through a labyrinth of trees until they reached another clearing, this one smaller than the first. He cut the engine, and Kubiak could hear the breaking waves of Lake Superior. Hollinger wrapped his scarf over his nose and mouth and motioned Kubiak to do the same. Then the five of them climbed out of the Jeep and set off through the forest, leaning against a wind coming off the lake that threatened to blow them back whence they had come.

"Naturally," Hollinger shouted, "the lake is easily accessed in the summer. We've already mapped out the land we're walking across now. Soon it will be campsites. Later, cabins. Someday a hotel."

After a few minutes' walk, the trees fell away behind them and they were crossing a vast valley of ice between the forest and Superior's seemingly infinite horizon. Hollinger, his scarf flapping furiously, stopped, pointed west, then east.

"Bad River Reservation there, the state line and Michigan's upper peninsula there. Carlsen Bay is a bottleneck through which everyone in the northeast woods of Wisconsin must pass in order to experience this," and he held his arms out toward the tall waves cresting before them.

Dramatic. No doubt which member of the team wrote the

boys' brochures. Kubiak dropped the scarf from his face, leaned into Karl Carlsen, and shouted, "Makes your land sound better than gold. I still don't see why you're selling it."

"The future, Mr. Kubiak," Carlsen shouted back. He waved his arm toward the southeast. "We Carlsens will keep a small section of land back here. Prime location. With Mike and David's hard work and financial investment, that bit of property will be worth more than all we now hold. Plus, we get our thirty thousand from the sale."

"Eventually," Hollinger yelled, "we hope to make the area a year-round resort."

"With this kind of weather?"

"Thousands of people flock to Minoqua every winter. We intend to use it as a jumping-off point to show them the true majesty of this part of the country. Believe me, sir, it's not impossible. And it's the only way to ensure real success. Ask Pat Wallis. His Sunset Inn is barely making it on a seasonal basis."

"Then he should be rooting for you as well. Location, location."

"That's right. And don't think he's unaware of that. He didn't drive up from Milwaukee to reopen the inn for the weekend simply out of friendship. In fact, he's a principal investor in our corporation."

Corporation. These two kids who stumbled into the north woods four years ago, bought a boat, and built it into a business, were now a corporation. Not impossible, Hollinger had said. In spite of himself, Kubiak was beginning to believe him. He could picture his daughter this past summer sitting in the Sunset Inn across the table from this boy, listening to these same words and falling in love with the dreamer who convinced her it could all come true.

And now the boy was waiting for her father's reaction. Kubiak looked around him, back at the now-distant forest. "Well," he said, "it is a nice beach."

"Beach?" Hollinger and Losito exchanged puzzled looks. "What beach? The land ends just beyond the tree line. We're standing on top of Lake Superior."

In that case, Kubiak suggested, perhaps it was time to go back to the Jeep.

They ate a late breakfast at the Sunset Inn, where Wallis informed them of the storm and road closings. The immediate family met in Hollinger's cabin. After Maria determined the wedding would go on as planned, she and Denise went to the office/recreation lodge to make phone calls. Kubiak spent the afternoon going over maps

and dreams with Hollinger, while Losito and the Carlsens went back to the Sunset Inn to pick up provisions for the bachelor party.

By ten o'clock that night the temperature had dropped another fifteen degrees. Dinner had been early so the party, attended by Hollinger, Losito, Wallis, and the younger Carlsen, could get under way. Kubiak had left Denise and Maria alone in his daughter's cabin and was working through a chapter in a book he didn't care for. The noise coming from the recreation lodge didn't aid his progress. Finally he gave up, rose from his bunk, put on his boots, and went outside to expend some energy before attempting sleep.

Walking across the ice-crust-ed snow, with the sky above him blacker, the stars brighter, than he had ever imagined them, Kubiak felt a bit of regret for having spent his half century of existence shuffling around the same Chicago turf on which he had been born, where the city lights radiated a sheltering ochre umbrella. Still, he knew he could never grow accustomed to this kind of country. Maybe he was just too old to change. But then, as he walked a wide circle around the recreation lodge, its windows blazing light, a stereo blaring over the laugh-

ter of those inside, he found amusing the men's need to gather around light and shout away the very wilderness to which they, for some reason, were drawn.

After only a few minutes the skin on his nose and cheeks began to tingle sharply, and he headed back toward his cabin, then noticed the light in the Carlsens' window. He ventured a knock. Karl Carlsen welcomed the company, offered coffee, which Kubiak declined. He asked Carlsen why he hadn't attended the party.

"Too old for such nonsense," he answered, waving away the idea. He said he'd had his share, had married off one daughter and two sons, all of whom had moved south.

"What about Joseph?" Kubiak asked.

"Joseph, he is more like me. The cities never drew him away, and for that I'm glad. After all, imagine a Carlsen Bay with no Carlsens in it!"

"He doesn't appear to share your enthusiasm for Carlsen Bay's future."

Another wave. "You must forgive the way he carries himself. Joseph has never had to deal with people. He's never got good at it. And yes, he did have reservations, but I've convinced him it's in his interest that he sell the land."

"That he sell it?"

"David didn't tell you? It's his. I transferred it to him two years ago, after my heart attack. The idea of my family squabbling over it, or dividing it up after my death, came to my mind lying in that hospital. Joseph stayed on it. It seemed only right it should be his."

The old man went on about his health, his family, his land, a long, rambling story, pleasantly dull, providing the invitation to sleep Kubiak's book hadn't. Kubiak was just preparing to excuse himself when the cabin door opened and Joseph entered, kicking the snow from his boots against the jamb.

"Back so soon?" his father asked.

Joseph only grunted, shuffled over to his bunk, where he removed his boots. That chore completed, he looked up, gave both men a glare, and muttered, "Too much noise."

But there was no more noise, Kubiak noticed in the awkward silence smothering the three of them. There was no sound at all coming from the recreation lodge. He stood, said his good-byes, and went outside in time to see Pat Wallis walking quickly from the lodge. Kubiak opened his mouth to call out to him, some "Bit early to end the party" nothing, checked himself, watched the Sunset Inn's

owner climb into his truck and roar off. The recreation lodge's windows still burned bright. Kubiak stood looking at them for a few minutes until his exposed skin burned and his fingers and toes grew numb.

**S**aturday morning the second Grand Cherokee was gone. So was Losito. At first everyone was merely curious. Then came the jokes, nervous little jokes. By one thirty Hollinger had phoned everyone he could think of, even Glen Anderson in whose barn the two boats were being stored for the winter. Sometime after two P.M. he asked Kubiak if he wanted to tag along for a ride.

"Back to the lake?" Kubiak asked as Hollinger drove Cherokee 1 up the path they had taken the previous morning. "Why would Losito come up here in the middle of the night?"

"No good reason. But it's the sort of thing he might do to blow off steam."

"Why would he feel the need to do that?" Hollinger said nothing. "How drunk was he when you left him?"

"I've seen him worse."

"That wasn't my question."

"We were all a little wasted. It was a bachelor party, after all."

Hollinger took his eyes off the



road long enough to give Kubiak a look that said he wasn't going to answer any more questions just now. Kubiak complied, remembering he didn't really know this boy at all.

They reached the first clearing and stopped, listened. There was nothing around them but silent woods. Hollinger shifted into low and continued on towards the lake. As they came around the final bend into the clearing of Section B, Kubiak saw the back end of Cherokee 2.

They stopped behind it, secured their gloves, hats, and scarves. While Hollinger moved around the clearing calling out Losito's name, Kubiak approached the cold Jeep. Its doors were locked. He cupped his hands and peered inside. Empty. Meanwhile, Hollinger had started up the path that led to the lake.

Kubiak followed. They reached the wide plane of ice Kubiak had thought was a beach. Hollinger walked up and down the tree line, calling out for Losito. When the futility of it finally settled in, the two men retreated back down the path, this time moving through the woods along either side of it.

They were nearly back to the clearing when Kubiak spotted the bottle of Stolichnaya. He picked it up. The small amount of vodka left in its bottom had

chilled to the consistency of syrup.

"His?"

Hollinger nodded. "He took it with him back to his cabin last night."

"Was it full?"

"Nearly."

Twenty yards deeper into the woods they found him. In the end Mike Losito had curled into the fetal position, his hands tucked into his crotch to give his frozen fingers one last bit of warmth. Except for the color of his skin, he looked as though he might be asleep.

There was no debate over what to do with him. Kubiak used Hollinger's knife to mark two trees. Then he slipped his hands under Losito's arms while Hollinger grasped the dead boy's ankles. When they lifted the body, Losito's right leg bent in a way it shouldn't have.

"Broken leg," Hollinger said on the drive back. "That explains it. Drunk or not, Mike was too familiar with this country to let it kill him."

"He stumbled?"

"I'd imagine."

"But what was he doing up there? Howling at the moon?"

"I don't know. It's my fault, though."

"Oh?"

"I never should have let him take that bottle back to his cab-

in with him. He had . . . a problem with booze."

A confession, yes, but not exactly the one Kubiak was ready to hear.

Denise held out her hand, palm up. "What you're thinking is impossible. Isn't it tragedy enough the poor boy wandered off and froze to death?"

Kubiak extracted the check from his wallet and gave it to his wife. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You're curious."

Yes, he was curious. It wasn't that he was the cold, emotionless fish his daughter had accused him of being minutes ago. He would have liked nothing more than to lie back in their soft cushion of sorrow, hold his arms around his small family, and let someone else answer the questions in his head.

But there was no one else even contemplating them, was there?

"Losito was not alone up at that lake."

"A gut feeling? Instinct?"

"More than that. I'm just not certain what."

"You found the Jeep up there with Losito."

"Yes."

"In that case, how would his companion get back here last night? On foot?" Kubiak shook

his head. "Could anyone have survived that walk?"

"No," he said. "There would have had to have been two cars."

"Oh? But why take two cars?"

"If they left at separate times

"

"To meet there."

"Yes."

"Except, when two people arrange a meeting, it's because one of them is at point A and the other is at point B. In this case, there is no point B. We're all here, and this phantom person might have found it more convenient to simply walk over to Losito's cabin and knock on his door."

"Not if he intended to kill him."

"A plan in which Losito kindly participated."

"Okay. Losito was followed," Kubiak offered weakly.

"Not without knowing it. Headlights in the dark, darling. Besides, no one did kill him, did they? The boy froze to death. He was drunk. He fell. He passed out, and he died."

Kubiak went to the window and stared out. From there he could see the recreation lodge. Hollinger had emerged from it and was walking across the snow toward them. The sun had nearly set and the shadows of the pines drew black bars across the ground.

"I found the vodka bottle where Losito left it, just a few yards from the path, at the edge of the clearing. His body was another twenty beyond that. I don't care how drunk he was. His leg was broken, he was in pain. At some point he must have realized he was dying. He should have been dragging himself back towards the Jeep rather than away from it."

"He lost his bearings. A litre of eighty proof will do that sort of thing to you."

Hollinger reached their cabin and knocked. It was Denise who opened the door to him.

"I finally got through to Iron County a half hour ago," he said, rubbing his hands vigorously as the cold that had entered with him explored the cabin's corners. "Talked to some deputy. The storm has hit them hard. The roads are still closed, electric is out all over, and they've got a few tourists stranded out on the snowmobile trails. In short, the guy I talked to said he wasn't sure when they could get someone up here. It probably won't be until tomorrow morning."

Kubiak said, "You did explain the situation to them?"

The only sign Hollinger showed of having registered Kubiak's tone was a slight narrowing of his eyes. "I don't like the idea of leaving Mike lying

on a table in Cabin 5 any more than you. I even offered to drive his body down to them tonight, myself. The deputy didn't seem to see any reason for it, but he took our number and said he'd try to contact the sheriff and get his opinion. He just called me back. He told me to stay put, that one more person out there is the last thing they need. They can't respond to the number of emergencies they have now, and the night's only going to get worse."

Maria sat straight-backed on the edge of her bed, a fresh application of her makeup dry. Kubiak hoped to keep it that way. He pulled a chair up beside his daughter, sat in it. Their knees touched.

"I can't just let it go," he told her. "You do understand why I can't."

"No," she said, chin high, tone flat, braced for confrontation. "You're not a cop any more. And even if you were, you have no business acting like one within your family."

"He's not my family yet. The police won't be here until morning."

"We can wait. People do. Normal people."

"What, then? Handing it over to them won't make the questions disappear. I don't know if their judgment will be enough

to loosen my grip on your wrist at the altar."

"You could try trusting my judgment."

Could he? It was what this weekend had been about, after all, the father "giving away" his daughter, the only duty expected of him. But society's cold standards of adulthood be damned, he still saw her as a little girl stumbling through decisions of the smallest consequence, falling into no trouble Daddy couldn't make right. He was still waiting for that revelation that would release them both, something as simple as his seeing her walk down a staircase and being unable to recognize her as his baby, or her dropping a book from her face to reveal to him one of her mother's experienced smiles. Perhaps it had already occurred and he had chosen to turn his head away.

"There was an argument last night," he told her. "At the bachelor party."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw the party break up. Something soured it, and aside from neighbors phoning in noise complaints, only a fight kills a good time that quickly."

"You're spying on him now."

"I was taking a walk. Against his good advice."

"If you have a question for

David, you should ask it of him."

"I could give it a shot, but he won't like it. I learned that this afternoon. Besides, the most important question to me is whether David told you about it or if he's keeping secrets."

"We have no secrets."

"Then he did tell you."

"Yes, but it was a silly thing. Meaningless."

"Under normal circumstances, maybe. Considering the events since . . ." He gave her a moment. Her chin had lowered. "The police will ask about it in the morning."

"It wasn't that serious. Everyone thought it was a joke at first. Mike was nagging at David, the usual bachelor party thing, last chance to back out, escape the ball and chain. But as Mike got more and more drunk, he pressed the point harder and harder. David told me it became embarrassing."

"It wasn't a joke."

"Apparently not. Mike told David that by marrying me he was endangering their partnership. They had been a team for so long, and now Mike was afraid his role would be diminished. Odd man out. David told him he was just drunk and maybe a little jealous. He tried to assure Mike nothing would change, that I was not a third partner, that I was his wife.



Mike wouldn't listen. Finally David stood firm. He told Mike the marriage was taking place Sunday, period. If Mike wanted to bow out as best man, that was his business. Mike grabbed a bottle, said something about making plans to ensure his equal share in Carlsen Bay, and stalked back to his cabin."

"This was after Joseph and Pat Wallis left?"

"Yes."

Kubiak sat back, thought about an old story that began with two friends sharing a boat. Then there was the one about the two pioneers and the woman who came into their lives. Both stories had the same ending.

He asked Maria, "Did Losito say he was making plans, or that he had already made plans?"

Maria thought a moment. "It might have been the latter. I don't know. David didn't go into much detail. He was concerned about Mike, said he hoped he hadn't driven off, that maybe he was up at the lake sulking, thinking things over. I suggested he go up there and see."

"And that I join him?"

"I thought it would be smart to have someone else there, just in case Mike was . . ."

Was what? Still angry? Still drunk? Still alive? Poor Hollinger. She had put him in a tough

spot. Facing one more snag in the weekend's wedding plans, a partnership in jeopardy, and a threat from his best friend, he had found himself forced to entertain an inquisitive future father-in-law.

"Dad," Maria said, interrupting his thoughts, "you're not going to do anything stupid, are you?"

Kubiak stood, leaned over, and kissed her on her forehead. He left without making any promises. How could a man promise his daughter anything, really?

Outside, he counted the lights in the cabins' windows. His own was bright, with Denise inside the cabin, probably tucking the check back into the wedding card. The Carlsens' lamp was burning, as was Hollinger's. Pat Wallis would be at his inn, standing in the pine-paneled banquet room, which was prepared for the rehearsal dinner that would not be taking place.

He repeated the walk he had taken the previous evening around the now-dark recreation lodge, wondering what to do next, or if he should do anything at all. It would be twelve hours or so before anyone from the county arrived. A long night ahead. Everyone, for the time being, was huddled just where they were supposed to be,

though Wallis was a guess, one a phone call could confirm.

As Kubiak came upon the line of cars, his Corolla, Cherokee 1, the Carlsens' Land Rover and Wrangler, he wondered if it might not be wise to ask everyone to forfeit their keys until morning. He didn't want any of them going back to the lake and disturbing the site he had marked, or going anywhere else, for that matter. Awkward. He could imagine their faces as this interloper from Chicago called them together and demanded...

Keys. Keys and locks. How had he dismissed the locks?

Not gut feeling. Not instinct. It was the Jeep that had told Kubiak that Losito had not been alone up at the lake.

While Hollinger had been calling out his friend's name, Kubiak had approached Cherokee 2, had found its doors locked, had peered inside. Nothing there. Nothing, that is, to a man who had lived his entire life in Chicago, who wouldn't think of leaving his car unlocked.

But a man in the country? Alone, in the middle of the north woods, in the middle of the night? What reason would he have to lock his car doors?

He would have no reason.

In fact, people in this part of the country tended to leave

their car keys in the ignition, something Kubiak discovered twenty minutes later when he chose Cherokee 1 over his Corolla to take him back to the lake.

He was afraid he might not be able to follow the path at night, but for all its twists and drops, the thick forest bracketing it left him little room to stray. It was after he reached the first clearing that he found difficulty. There was no clear trail leading to Section B, and twice he was certain he was lost before he came upon Cherokee 2 where he and Hollinger had left it that afternoon.

The idea that there was no guarantee he would be able to find his way back did not escape him.

Lights out, and the country black swallowed him. Engine cut, and there was no sound but the wind that buffeted the heavy vehicle in which he sat. Kubiak switched on the flashlight he had brought along. It was a Ray-o-Vac Roughneck, heavy, solid, with an adjustable beam. It was what he had used earlier, inside Cabin 5, as he had not wished to light the lamp and advertise his presence there. He had run its beam over Losito's corpse, which lay on the table in the center of the room. There had been an eerie, ghoul-ish few minutes while he had

searched the boy's pockets and found nothing but a wallet and loose change.

Now Kubiak approached Cherokee 2, shone the light through the driver's window just to be sure it was as he had remembered it. The keys to the Jeep were not in the ignition. Clever. To have left them there would have drawn attention to the locked doors, and there would have been the possibility that Losito, even with his busted leg, might have managed to break the Jeep's window, crawl inside, and drive himself home.

Kubiak turned away and started up the path.

Hollinger's wonder hat did him little good out here. The wind lifted the flaps and shrieked through the gaps into his ears. When he removed his mittens and attempted to tighten the strings securing the flaps, his fingers grew numb. The exposed skin on his face, a three inch wide strip between his hat and the scarf over his nose, tingled, then burned, then felt as heavy as the bone of his skull beneath it.

He found the trees he had marked, between which Losito had died, and began a slow, deliberate search along the ground, using the trees as the center point of a constantly expanding circle. A long, tedious task in fair weather, but Kubi-

ak knew he didn't have much time. The wool of his scarf, moistened by his breath, had iced. It stuck to his lips, and with each breath the air stung his nose, which was beginning to clog. When he tried to breathe through his mouth, the air pricked his gums and burned his lungs.

As the circle grew, so did the ground he had to cover. The work became more exhausting, his breaths coming shorter as he moved around trees and through brush. He had hoped the flashlight, a tool Losito had lacked, might make the job easier, as its beam would reflect off the metal for which he was searching, but the iced-over snow glinted back light everywhere. And he had already been out here too long. Leaning against a tree, looking out at the area he had covered and all he had left to cover, Kubiak stamped his feet hard, trying to bring feeling back into his toes.

You're not going to do anything stupid, are you? Funny. He might have laughed if he thought his teeth could stand the exposure. He had to get back to the Jeep, warm up, then perhaps try again.

He moved through the woods in small steps like a drunk man checking a forward stumble. His only sense of the ground beneath his feet was a slight

shock to each kneecap as one leg landed in front of the other. The flashlight's beam was growing thinner, dimmer. He might have thought about bringing replacement batteries. Finally the path appeared before him, with the clearing at its end. He could see Cherokee 2 and behind it Cherokee 1. Behind that was another truck, the Land Rover, and between Kubiak and the three vehicles stood a man bundled in a scarf, a knit cap, a down coat, and jeans.

Kubiak would have seen the Land Rover's headlights if Joseph Carlsen had used them to enter the clearing. The young man knew his land. Running lamps had been sufficient.

Kubiak stopped twenty feet in front of him. Carlsen had yet to move or speak. Kubiak waited, then took a step to move around him. Carlsen let him take that step but not another. He moved sideways, only a few inches but enough to leave Kubiak no doubt of his intentions.

Kubiak scraped the scarf away from his mouth. "Couldn't find them, Joseph," he called out over the wind. Joseph said nothing, stood with his legs apart, his hands at his sides. "Just like Losito, I couldn't find the damned keys. I doubt you'll have better luck."

Still, nothing. Kubiak moved again, slowly, in a wide arc that

would bring him around Carlsen to the other side of the Jeeps. Joseph waited, watched, until he could guess Kubiak's destination, then moved to block him again.

Kubiak took a step back.

"You haven't thought this out," he shouted. "And you don't have long to rethink it. This isn't the middle of the night. The fact that we're both missing will be noticed at the cabins. What will you tell them?"

"I came up here to find you," Joseph called in his dull, flat tone.

"You found me."

"Too late, maybe."

Kubiak shook his head. "It won't work again. Two nights, two deaths. Rates more than a casual local inquiry. And there are still the keys. They're out there somewhere. How long have you got to find them? You won't have another chance to return here."

"I don't have to find them. They fell from Michael's pocket."

"Did they? Depends on how they landed. A good, hard toss, they make an impact that can be measured. Maybe they nicked a tree before they fell. Hell, maybe they're caught in a tree. You don't know. Then there are the experts out of Madison who will be examining Losito's body."

"So? He froze to death."

"That's right. But his leg was broken first, and a blow to the leg from an attack looks different from a shinbone cracked in a fall. A real investigation will show that, and a real investigation is what you're going to have, whether I walk out of here or not. So you see, Joseph, it makes no difference. If I die out here, it will be only because you want me dead. Don't fool yourself into thinking it's anything else."

More waiting, and the silent, still Joseph showed no indication of what he was thinking. Kubiak didn't know how much time passed, seconds, minutes, but his limbs dead weights and his mind growing sluggish, he knew he could wait no longer. All prayer and bluster, he walked forward in a direct path toward the Jeep.

**"I** warned you about this country," Hollinger said, pacing the Sunset Inn's banquet room. "You were an idiot to go up there. For a set of keys?"

The standard arguments over frostbite treatment had ended. Kubiak was on his third Rémy. Pat Wallis was back behind the bar. Maria and Denise, quietly sharing a mix of anger and resignation, were seated at the

round table with Kubiak. Karl Carlsen, at the bar, had voiced his outrage and was now silent. Joseph sat alone at a table in the corner, staring down into his folded hands.

"I had to get to them before anyone had a chance to move them," Kubiak said. "They were the reason why we found Losito's body where we did, and why the Jeep's doors were locked, when Losito hadn't locked them."

"You're telling us Joseph went up there with him?"

"No. You were right, David. Losito did go up to the lake alone, but he wasn't alone long. He was angry and sullen, he wanted to blow off steam and was so drunk he didn't feel the cold. He was afraid his end of the partnership might be diminished with Maria in the picture, so he was making plans to increase his leverage in the land deal. Only two people here this weekend could help him do that. One is Joseph. The other is Mr. Wallis."

"Me?" the inn's owner asked. "What in hell?"

"You were an investor in the corporation. It would have been an advantage if he had you on his side."

Wallis looked to the others for help. "I would never consider doing such a thing."

"I don't know that," Kubiak

told him. "But I do know you didn't kill Losito. He was found in Section B. Until yesterday, no one even knew if it was accessible by car. David and Mike wondered about it when we drove up there with the Carlsons. You weren't with us, so you wouldn't have been able to find him. Besides, Joseph told me on the drive back tonight that Losito had approached him with a deal where he would put up half of the thirty thousand and own the land jointly with Joseph, leaving Hollinger dependent upon them."

Karl Carlsen pounded his fist on the bar. "My son did not accept that offer."

"No."

"Yet you tell me he killed the boy because of it?"

"I did not. Joseph had no reason to kill Losito. He was ambivalent about the sale of the land to begin with. You talked him into it. And as the land's sole owner, he had the power to do with it as he pleased."

"So, then?"

"So, then, Karl. You, on the other hand, were powerless. The sale of the land meant a great deal to you. It was your son's future."

"Me, now. This is becoming funny, Mr. Kubiak."

"When Joseph told you last night about Losito's blow-up at the party, you knew the deal

was in more jeopardy than you had thought. So you waited until Losito left the recreation lodge. You saw him leave for the lake and drove up there after him. He didn't see you. You knew the way.

"You parked behind Cherokee 2, removed the keys from the ignition where Losito had left them. After all, you didn't want him driving back until you'd had your chance to reason with him. But you might have waited until morning when he would be sober and less angry. You fought. You picked up something, a branch or a heavy flashlight, and you broke his leg. Then you left him."

"You had to lock the Jeep to make sure he couldn't crawl into it for shelter and possibly survive the night. And you had to get rid of the keys where their absence wouldn't raise suspicions. You tossed them into the dark woods where it would be assumed he dropped them. If Losito was able to find them somehow and make his way home, the most you could be accused of would be assault. If he didn't find them . . . well, he didn't, did he?"

"An impressive performance," Denise said when they were back in their cabin. "Too bad I missed the one of you shuffling



around in the forest wearing that hat."

"If I had known it would amuse you," Kubiak said, flexing his toes, "I might have taken you along."

"Also, it would have been nice if you had gotten Karl to confess to something, rather than just hear him tell you what a funny man you are."

"He will. Whatever he used to break Losito's leg will turn up in a thorough search. And Joseph's actions up there tonight provided the police with enough to trump up a case against the boy, or at least convince Karl they can. The old man won't let that happen."

Denise climbed into her bunk above him. "The part I still don't understand is why, after determining that neither Joseph nor Pat Wallis had killed Losito, you turned directly to Karl, passing by David."

"What? Accuse my future son-in-law of murder?"

"You were suspicious of him from the outset. Don't deny it."

"Even if I were, which I'm not saying, Joseph wouldn't have followed me to the lake in order to protect Hollinger."

Kubiak handed his wife's paperback up to her, stared at the wedding card that had been beneath it. He picked up the card, lay down on his bunk, opened it.

"It's sad, really," he said. "The father becomes involved in murder trying to help his son, and the son indicts his father by attempting to cover up the crime. You see how much more stable life is when you're married to a cold, emotionless fish?"

The bed above him creaked. A hand dropped down, found his, and snatched away the wedding card, along with the check in its pocket.

# The Brothers Shimazi

## Dan Crawford



**T**here lived once two farmers who were brothers, by the name of Shimazi. Rooshua Shimazi lived on one farm with his young wife and two little boys. Nonthiel Shimazi had a farm just up the road from his brother's, no less fine for all that he had not married yet.

They worked their farms well and, come harvest, helped each other bring in the crops: hay into the barn and corn in great baskets to the storage sheds. It was the best harvest they'd seen in years.

Yet Rooshua was not content. One evening, some weeks after harvest time was over, he stared through the night at the home of his brother Nonthiel.

"Does something trouble you, husband?" asked his wife, who sat by the fire mending her older son's boots.

"My brother troubles me, wife," he said. "Here I stand in my beautiful house with my beautiful wife, and there sits my brother, all alone, in his little stone house. Why should it be that I have so many blessings when my brother is not one bit a worse man than I?"

"It must be fate, Rooshua," his wife said. "You can hardly give him a wife and boys of his own."

"No," Rooshua agreed. He rubbed his chin. "But what I can do is take him a bushel of corn. We have plenty for the winter, and it may well be that he will have less to do on the long winter nights without a family to entertain him. He might as well eat."

"Ah." His wife set down the boot she'd been working on. "But will he take corn from you, husband?"

Rooshua turned and winked at her. "He'll know nothing about it, my dear. I'll carry it over when night is at its darkest, and leave it in his shed."

"That would be the best way," his wife said, nodding. All the Shimazi men were hardheaded about taking gifts. Very difficult it was to get them to take a thing they had neither worked for nor paid for.

Now, strange to say, Nonthiel was himself feeling very uncomfortable that night. For something to do, he stepped to his doorway and studied the bright windows of his brother's house.

"A fine harvest," he told himself, for he had no one else to talk to. "A fine harvest. And yet . . . there sits the home of my brother, with his wife and his family. He has a lovely wife and a fine, strong pair of sons, and yet he has just as much corn as I have. Why should that be when he has four mouths to feed and I have only my own?"

The more Nonthiel thought about this, the less he liked it. Finally he rose and took up his coat. "I shall leave a basket of corn in his storage shed tonight when all is dark. It may be that he could run short on these long winter nights and be too proud to ask any of me. He's as hardheaded as ever our father was."

That was a dark night, with no moon to watch as two men crept through the shadows, each hauling with him a heavy basket of corn. Each brother knew the other's farm as well as he did his own,

so neither had any trouble slipping into the shed where the corn was stored. The watchdogs in the yard never barked, knowing the smell of each brother.

In the morning, each man went to his own storage shed, smiling with the knowledge of a good deed done in secret. And each brother, looking over his corn, rubbed his eyes and cried, "Did I dream it? Am I dreaming now?" Rooshua counted his baskets of corn six times, and Nonthiel counted seven.

"Perhaps there's such a thing as a corn fairy," Nonthiel muttered. He walked back into his house. "Best to get the chores done first. I'll worry about it later."

Rooshua worried about it right away. Finally he stepped into the house and said, "Did I not speak to you last night about taking a bushel of corn to my brother?"

"You did," his wife told him, putting butter into the morning porridge. "And then you went outside and were gone for a long time. I thought you were taking the corn to him then."

"So did I, wife; so did I," said Rooshua. "Yet the corn is still in the shed, every bit of it."

"You know well, husband," she replied, getting out the bowls for breakfast, "how you see six things to be done every time you step into the yard. It could be that you started in on some other chore and forgot about the corn."

Rooshua rubbed his chin. "That could very well have happened. I'll do it tonight, then. You watch me from the doorway, wife, and remind me if I don't go."

Once it was dark that evening, Rooshua went to his storage shed, took up a bushel of corn, and strode off along the south path to Nonthiel's farm. His wife watched until she could see him no more and then went back into the house to see what the baby was crying about. Therefore, she never saw Nonthiel come walking up the north path, a basket of corn in his arms.

Come morning, each brother hurried to the shed where the corn was kept. Each brother counted twice.

"The corn should grow in my fields as quickly as it does in my shed!" cried Nonthiel, throwing his hands in the air. He marched around the shed, picking up every empty basket he had. These he locked away in the barn. He was sure he had taken full baskets to his brother's farm, but this time he would be twice sure.

Rooshua stood tapping his foot, staring at the corn. Then he strode back into the house. "Something strange is in the wind,

wife," he said. "Tonight I shall take a hammer and nails with me and nail the basket down so it won't be following me home."

"You're so busy these nights, Rooshua," said his wife, shaking her head. "Your arms will be quite full with all this corn you're taking your brother, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," Rooshua said. "What if they are?"

"I thought you might take Nonthiel a few jars of preserves, as he has no wife to put them up for him," she said. "But if your arms are full—and with the hammer to carry as well—how could you take them?"

"Ah!" Rooshua scratched his chin. "I can tuck them down inside the basket maybe. Yes! And pile corn on top of them. Nonthiel won't find them until later in the winter, and he'll have no idea how they got there. He'll think the jam fairies came, perhaps."

It was agreed. That night Rooshua carried a basket with not only corn, but two jars of tomato preserves and one of rhuberry. His hammer went with him as well. He nailed that basket to the shelf as quietly as he could, not knowing his brother could not hear him. Once again Nonthiel had slipped away to Rooshua's shed with a basket of corn of his own.

And once again, come morning, each was amazed to find the same number of baskets as before. "Is it a curse or a blessing?" Rooshua demanded, running his hands among the corn.

Nonthiel, furious, took hold of the basket he found, to throw it onto the floor. Because it was nailed to the shelf, the bottom stayed where it was while the top came away in his hands. Corn poured across his feet, and three shining things that were not corn.

"What is this?" he demanded, picking up the little jars. "Tomato, rhuberry, tomato. Have the jam fairies . . ."

Then he recognized the little labels. "That's it, is it? Why, that turnip! That potato-faced rutabaga!"

He ran from his shed straight away to Rooshua's farm. Finding his brother in the yard, he thrust a handful of coins out. "Has my birthday come," he demanded, "that you felt obliged to make me a present? What do you mean by bringing me corn and other things I have done nothing to deserve?"

Rooshua held up both hands and took a step back so as not to touch the money. "I didn't take you that jelly," he said. "I was working in the shed all last night."

"Ha!" Nonthiel stabbed a finger at him, "You know it happened in the night, then, and you know it was jelly! Liar! If you'd really been

in your shed, I'd have seen you when I . . . " He slapped a hand over his own mouth,

"Oho!" Rooshua charged forward and took hold of his brother's collar. "That's it, is it? Perhaps you thought all my own corn was melted away with the heat of November!"

Nonthiel dropped the coins and pushed his brother back. Rooshua shoved Nonthiel. Rooshua's wife rushed from the house, hearing the scuffle of feet. "What is this? Stop it! Stop at once!" She stepped between the brothers, holding up her hands to keep them apart.

"I'll see you at law!" spat Nonthiel. "You can't insult me by giving me presents!"

Rooshua shook his fist. "You insulted four of us all at once! I'll see that the judge has you taken away!"

"Well, I'll see about that right now!" Nonthiel shouted back, and started to run down the road. Rooshua followed at once. The brothers raced each other all the way into town, even up to the door of the judge's house. They banged on the door together, each wishing to present his case first.

The judge was an older man and not used to getting up so early in the morning as did the farmers he served. When his secretary brought word that two men with a quarrel had arrived, and that they were named Shimazi, he grumbled and reached for his official robes of office.

"Better hear it at once," he muttered, looking for his shoes. "These Shimazis! I've heard cases for them, for Mr. Shimazi before them, and for Old Man Shimazi before that. Every one of them with a head as hard as milestones on the road to prison. Never give an inch, not they: they are as stubborn as a stump."

Once he was dressed, the judge walked down to the courtroom. "Now, my boys," he said, taking a seat behind his desk, "what's it all about this time? Is Mr. Balziel's cow straying into your fields again?"

The brothers, speaking now one and now the other, but mostly both at the same time, explained their problem, how each had insulted the other with baskets of corn. The phrases "thief in the night" and "Father must be weeping in his grave" were used more than twice. Each brother grew redder and redder around the eyes as he thought of the horrible insult he had been offered.

The judge sat silent through all of this. Finally, when the brothers were out of breath, he rose from his chair. "I refuse to decide



this case," he said. "It's bad enough to have a case in which a Shimazi is arguing with someone else. But a Shimazi against a Shimazi? No mere judge has such a brain. You'll need to go to the palace for that, my boys."

The brothers ran from the judge's home at once, racing to the palace of the queen. It was a slower race than the first. For one thing, the road was all uphill. For another, they'd run quite a way already. But mainly they knew that the palace was a place filled with serious and powerful people. Not just anyone was allowed inside; only those on important business could count on a chance to see the queen. Each brother was beginning to fear that, although of course this was important business indeed, the imposing people who lived in the palace might not think so.

The first person they saw was very imposing indeed. (The palace guards all wore gold braid worth eight baskets of corn on their shoulders and scowled most of the time to demonstrate how important their jobs were.) The Shimazi brothers explained their troubles to him, but he appeared to have a little difficulty understanding the problem, even when the brothers weren't talking at the same time.

"Um," he said, scowling now to show he was confused. "I'll, er, have to call my captain."

The Shimazis were quite tired of this scowling and obviously not very bright individual, so they pushed him aside. "Let us in and we'll call him for you," said Rooshua.

"Captain!" called Nonthiel, striding through the front gate of the palace. "Hello! Captain! Is there a captain running around here?"

"Who are you and what is your business?"

This man wore a gold chain and a high hat with gold buttons on it. His sword, hanging at his side, was in a sheath covered with emerald butterflies. "There's the price of a good six acres there," Nonthiel whispered to Rooshua.

"Are you the captain of the guard?" Rooshua demanded. "The man at the gate wants to talk to you."

"Does he?" the splendid officer demanded. "Why?"

"He wants to know whether to let us in."

The captain scowled. "It seems you decided for him. What is it you men want?"

Nonthiel quickly explained before Rooshua could interrupt. The captain seemed to have a twitch on one side of his face, which got worse as the explanation went on. "Business this important," the

officer said when Nonthiel had finished, "must—ahem—be taken to the Clerk of the Court."

"Thank you, sir," said Rooshua, glaring at his brother. "And where might we find him?"

The captain pointed. His hand seemed to tremble. "Just . . . just go through that door, and go along the hall to the left. Explain to the guard at the third door what very, very important business you have."

They thanked him again and hurried on. Rooshua looked back over one shoulder. "Do captains of the guard ever giggle?" he asked, a bit confused.

"Probably sneezing," his brother told him. "I noticed all the time I was talking to him that he seemed unwell."

At the third door on the left in the hall they entered, they found the Clerk of the Court. This was an elderly man who wore a high hat crusted with golden shells and clothes that shimmered whenever he moved.

"My whole farm isn't worth that shirt," Rooshua murmured to Nonthiel.

"Gentlemen?" said the Clerk as they stepped up to his desk. "How can I help you? Is it a matter of a boundary between farms? Did someone leave a gate open and let the animals escape?"

"Our judge could have handled small things like that," said Rooshua. Seeing Nonthiel's mouth open, he turned and said, "Hush! It's my turn!"

The Clerk of the Court did his best to look grave throughout Rooshua's explanation, but at the part where the two brothers found out what each other had done, he let a chuckle escape.

At once the brothers were rightfully offended. "Corn is not a matter for laughter in the country!" Nonthiel declared.

"We mean to have a decision on this matter if we have to go all the way to the queen herself!" agreed Rooshua.

"Well, now," said the Clerk, struggling to control himself. "The Prime Minister will have to decide that. Come with me."

He led them through the palace to a grand room where waited a tall, solemn man with tall purple feathers in his hat and silver bells in his beard. His coat was of green cloth with panels of green gemstones.

"The queen must be richer even than I thought," Nonthiel whispered, having quite forgotten by now how furious he was with his brother.

"Ah," said the Prime Minister when he saw the Clerk of the Court following the two men. "All Her Majesty's servants must dress well, to show they are worthy of her. Some servants take longer to learn this than others, but most take to it in the end. What may I do for two good subjects of Her Majesty?"

The brothers looked at the Clerk, but he shook his head. "I can't tell it as well as you do," he said.

This time Nonthiel told the story. The Prime Minister was far too important to chuckle. He did nod to the Clerk. "Yes, indeed," he said, stroking his beard and making the bells jingle. "We certainly must have this case heard by Her Majesty. Come, sirs! This way to the queen's court."

The brothers followed him along grand halls hung with rich tapestries, all unknowing how unusual this was. The queen very seldom heard cases, often no more than one a year. The Prime Minister, though, felt this was a case she must hear. He was one of the few people who knew that, due to a well-deserved curse, the country would not prosper and the treasury would not be filled until the queen smiled. With the treasury so nearly empty all the time, she had never found anything to smile about.

Stepping up shining stairs into the queen's court, the brothers began to realize this was not a place for just any farmers. The beautiful objects that hung on the wall were worth at least one farm each. The beautiful people who stood in front of these wore clothes that had certainly never come anywhere near a new-plowed field.

Before the brothers could think of a way to slip out of the room, though, a trumpet rang out with the call that something was about to happen. The man holding the trumpet took it from his lips and announced, "Her Majesty the Queen!"

Rooshua started to kneel as the first woman came through the big double doors, but Nonthiel pulled him up again. These were only the queen's ladies, the women who waited around Her Majesty to run errands for her. Each of them glittered more than the one who had come in the door before her. In high hair, each wore an even higher tiara, studded with whatever jewels would best show off the color of the wearer's tresses. The shoes that peeped out from under the glittering gowns were shiny, new, expensive.

Two farmers, in their work clothes, with boots that had started to crack and been fastened back together, could not have been more out of place. But corn was important, and so was justice. Nonthiel

and Rooshua stood where they were. "We must see the queen," murmured Rooshua.

The last woman to enter wore the grandest dress of all, a gown of dark red and blue hung with tiny golden chains. Her red hair, done up in dozens of curls, positively shone in the light bouncing through the jewels of her crown. Her curls were tight, her lips were tight, and she walked slowly, in a manner suited to her power and importance. No one could have guessed quite how old she was, for there were no lines at all in her face.

Stepping up to the big golden throne, she looked around the courtroom. "And what business is there before my royal court?" she demanded, staring quite hard at the pair of farmers.

Nonthiel and Rooshua were sort of taking baby steps backward, but the Prime Minister waved his hand toward them, his rings sparkling. "These men have an important matter about which Your Majesty's judgment must be sought. No lesser official could answer so tangled and difficult a question."

One royal eyebrow slid up. "Yes?" the queen said, looking from one brother to the other.

Nonthiel looked at Rooshua and then took a step forward. "Well, Your Majesty, my brother here has been sneaking to my baskets of corn."

The queen nodded. "Stealing it?"

"No," Nonthiel told her. "Sneaking some of his in with mine."

"Ah." Her Majesty blinked. "While you slept, was it?"

Rooshua moved up next to his brother. "Don't let him tell you that, Your Majesty! He was out by night at the same time, sneaking his corn into my barn!"

Nonthiel shook a finger at his brother. "But he started it, Your Majesty! More than once he sneaked to my barn to give me things that did not belong to me!"

"And he did just the same!" Rooshua said, stepping closer to the queen and almost shouting at her. "He shouldn't have . . ."

"Well, he . . ." Nonthiel began, trying to stand farther forward than his brother.

The queen raised a hand to halt them. "You . . ." She leaned forward a bit. "You came to my court to complain that your brother gave you presents?"

"Yes!" cried Rooshua. "Without my permission!"

The queen's mouth dropped open and then snapped shut. Then the edges curled up! As Her Majesty began to laugh for the first

time in her life, bells in the tower above rang with no hands pulling the bell ropes. The room grew bright and rang with laughter. Even those who did not know about the curse understood that something good and magical had just occurred.

The only people not enjoying the moment were the two men waiting with folded arms. When, for a moment, the great noise of laughter grew a little quieter, Nonthiel called, "And your decision, Your Majesty?"

The sight of those two serious faces nearly started the queen laughing again. With only a smile, though, she raised her hands to silence the court. "You must have a decision, of course," she announced. "I award you all of his corn." She turned to Rooshua. "And I award you all of *his* corn. Now if either of you takes it into your head to give your brother something, you will be giving him what was his in the first place."

Rooshua looked to Nonthiel and smiled. Nonthiel looked at Rooshua and began to laugh. The queen laughed with them. Her curse had been lifted without its costing her anything.

The Prime Minister, however, stepped forward to say, "The country will now prosper, thanks to these gentlemen. Should not Your Majesty give them some reward?"

Rooshua and Nonthiel stopped laughing at once. "You have already given us a decision, Your Majesty," Rooshua said.

"We have all we need," Nonthiel agreed.

The queen raised her chin, now a little more offended than amused by these really unbelievable farmers. Bad enough for them to refuse gifts from each other, but to turn down a gift from her was quite unthinkable.

"I shall give you something you don't need, then," she told them. "There may be some little thing you could take home to your wives. I have any number of earrings where I've lost the other half of the pair."

"But my brother isn't married," Rooshua objected. "He has no wife to wear Your Majesty's fine earring."

"Then it's very simple." She clapped her hands. "Take one of my ladies-in-waiting, and you shall have a wife. All of you ladies who are not married, step forward, and the farmer shall have his choice."

Nonthiel took a step backward. He could see it would be very unfriendly of him to refuse Her Majesty's offer. But to have to choose

among a group of women he'd never met, and who were used to jeweled clothes, was more of a curse than a gift.

The ladies-in-waiting regarded Nonthiel in various ways. A few swooned with dismay at the thought of marrying a farmer with dirt on his cracked shoes. Others were eager to step forward. It was no easy thing to work for a queen who never smiled. Even if she had smiled just now, there was no guarantee that she'd ever do it again.

Rooshua studied the ladies-in-waiting, feeling very much as his brother did. To take any of these ladies and put her on a farm would be bad for the lady and for the farm. It would be a pity if Nonthiel had to spend all the money he made selling his corn to buy jewels for a court lady.

"Non!" he whispered, nodding toward the end of the row. "Look at her!"

Nonthiel looked. The woman who stood at the far right side of the room was the only lady there who looked anything like a farm wife. Her dress did not fit her so perfectly as the other dresses fit the other ladies. A tear in one sleeve had been mended. Not all the jewels in her tiara matched, and her gloves were mismates as well.

"She?" demanded the queen, who had heard this. "She's such a little stupid. Instead of buying new clothes, as a lady-in-waiting is supposed to do, she picks up any old things the others throw away. Don't take her. I grow quite tired scolding her all the time, and she will be just as stupid for you."

"As Your Majesty has solved our problem, we can perhaps help you," Nonthiel said. "You needn't grow so tired if she comes with us."

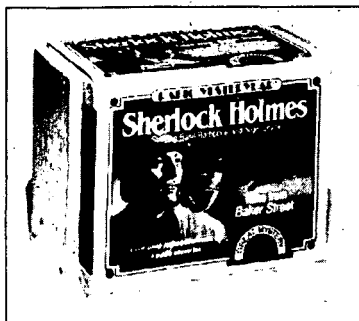
The queen shrugged. The lady-in-waiting, who was one of those who had stepped forward in hopes of escaping the court, hurried to the farmer's side. The queen offered to have them married right there, by the Clerk of the Court, but the brothers asked her permission for the marriage to take place in their own village, performed by the judge.

So it was done. Nonthiel had a wife who was thrifty and clever; she had a husband who was the same. She also had much better neighbors than she had ever had at the palace, for Rooshua and his wife were frequent visitors, always bringing gifts of corn since, after all, it was Nonthiel's corn by royal decree.

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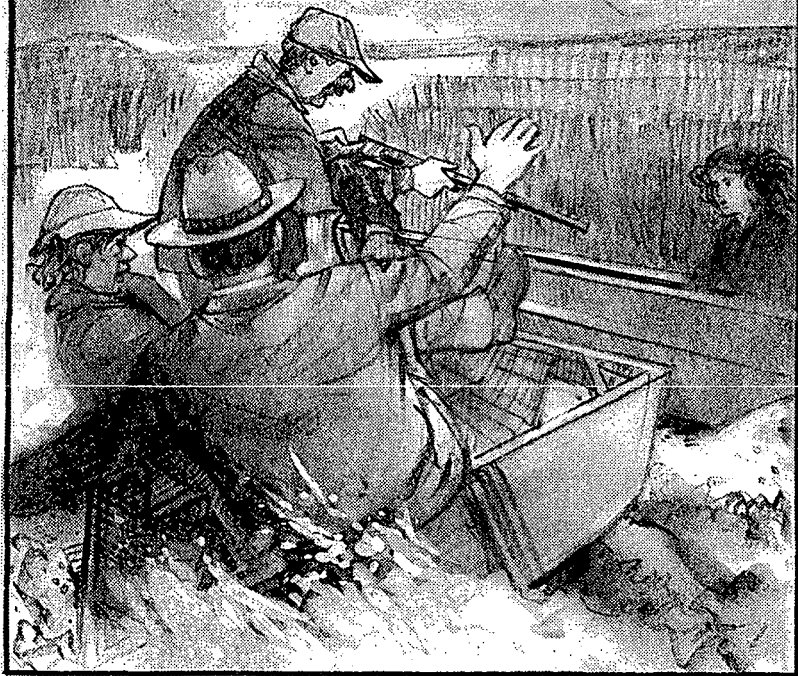
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# DEAD IN THE WATER

Jas. R. Petrin



**A**ngeline Goodenough inspected the noose she had tied and gave it a sharp tug, testing the twine and the rafter that supported it. Rain rattled loudly on the shingle roof of the garage. Coming down in buckets it was, Harvest

Street already a lake. You could no longer tell where the road ended and the sidewalk began, and when the wind gusted hard, you could barely see across the street.

But that was all right. In fact it was perfectly all right. She

didn't need nosy neighbors peering out of windows and taking notice of things.

The heavy twine ran straight up from its noose to the rafter, then down at a sharp angle to the wrought-iron leg of the workbench. The workbench was a heavy one, piled high with tools and all sorts of household junk. It would surely support the weight.

She looked at her watch. It was almost time for his pills and warm milk. He would be pressing his buzzer any moment now, as if she were a bell-hop at a hotel. Well, she would take him his milk. And afterward she wouldn't have to look at him again until five o'clock next morning. Anything could happen during that length of time.

Anything.

She climbed the ladder again, took the twine in her hands, and sawed it back and forth, cutting a small groove in the wood. Then she used a curved carpet knife to cut the cord flush at the rafter. She came back down the ladder bunching the cord in her fist and stuffing it into her pocket, then put the knife down on the workbench and hung the ladder back up on the wall.

There. Everything all carried out to the letter.

She picked up her umbrella,

which was leaning, still open, next to the door. Bad luck to leave an umbrella open indoors, they said. But then they said all sorts of things, didn't they? Like "The Lord helps those who help themselves."

She went out of the garage, swung the big wooden door shut behind her, and walked with squishing footsteps back up the walk to the house. Inside she kicked off her boots, pulled her squall jacket off, closed the umbrella, and hung it on a hook. She found the milk nicely warmed in its pan on the stove, and she switched the element off. She next took a plastic pill bottle from the cupboard, shook a single capsule out into her hand, and poured the milk into a mug that said on it "NINETY ISN'T OLD IF YOU'RE A TREE" (she had bought him the mug for his birthday six years ago), and finally she took the milk and the capsule up the wide, creaking stairs to the second floor.

His hollow eyes fixed on her as she entered the room, watery in his gaunt grey face and just about sightless due to cataracts and glaucoma. The bed had long ago been dragged from the corner to the center of the room so she could attend to him from both sides of it, as necessary.

"Okay," she said, "it's lights-out time. I brought you your milk and medicine, and I want

you to swallow them for me without any trouble. No gagging and spitting up. And I mean it this time. It's important that you get them down. More important this time than ever, okay?"

She wished she could explain to him just why it was so important. That she couldn't risk the least thing's being unnatural about his stomach contents.

She had fed him his dinner earlier than usual to make certain he would be hungry now, and he was. He gobbled the milk and the pill like a starving animal.

Right, she thought. Just like the plan.

She took a clean pillowcase from the dresser drawer and laid it at the foot of the bed. She went to the window, yanked the curtains open, and switched out the bedside light. The street-lamp on this side of the house let just enough illumination into the room for her to work by, casting dark dappled patches on the ceiling where it shone through the elm outside. This was much better. For some reason she did not feel comfortable going on with the plan in the homey glow of the bedside lamp. Semi-darkness was more suited to the job. She took the noose from her pocket, and also a shorter length of twine she

had cut from the same spool earlier.

"Okay," she said, sitting on the foot of the bed by the clean pillowcase, "now don't you go getting all agitated. I got to have a look at your feet. You know how they get sometimes."

Pulling the blankets up, she exposed his two pale feet. She worked fast, quickly cinching his ankles together with the pillowcase, the idea being not to leave any marks, and only then using the twine to tie them securely to one of the vertical iron bars at the foot of the bed.

She took a deep breath.

"Okay," she said, lifting his head from the pillow and deftly manipulating the twine, "now just you be patient one more minute, we're almost done." She was glad she couldn't see his face. She could still make out his eyes, though, the puzzled glint of them in the orange light from the window. Quickly she made her last adjustments with the unknotted end of the twine, gently but firmly taking up the slack.

"How's that?" she asked. "That okay?"

Talking to the old man and getting no answers from him had become second nature to her over the years. He was wonderful company. It was like talking to yourself. The glinting

eyes still followed her, but she saw no comprehension there.

"Right," she said, "now, I guess we're all set."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, stooping and taking one edge of the iron frame in her strong hands, she braced herself, then heaved the near side of the bed three feet up off the floor.

Twenty minutes later she was back downstairs, speaking into the kitchen phone.

"Cort, honey? It's me." Her voice was fluttering. "It's all taken care of. What do we do now?"

**I**t was morning, but the sun hadn't yet put in much of an appearance. It wasn't likely to, either, the sky heavily cloaked in dark scudding clouds. It was still raining, although not as hard as it had been throughout the night, when at times it had come driving out of the sky in sheets. Chief Robideau had never seen such a rain. The storm sewers hadn't been able to handle it, the river hadn't been able to handle the storm sewers, and when dawn finally arrived, it revealed a town that was almost half flooded. All of the low-lying areas were being evacuated by the volunteer fire brigade. People were gathering in restaurants and churches on

the high side of town and trading emotional stories of damage and loss. Boats were in high demand. They were extremely hard to come by. If you had one, you could just about name your price for it.

Robideau did not own a boat. Nor did the End of Main police department. But he had been lucky enough to run into Pete Melynychuk that morning and was able to put first dibs in on a water-taxi service Pete claimed he was starting up. Robideau felt he might need it.

Now, in his car, leaving the relative high ground of Burton Street on his way to respond to the Goodenough call, he almost felt as though he actually were in a boat, the vehicle pushing a bow wave and leaving a V-wake behind it that lapped at fences, front porches, and steps. As the water grew steadily deeper, he soon became aware of dampness under his heels and realized that water was leaking into the vehicle under the doors.

His stomach burned; he needed a Maalox tablet. But he was already in sight of the Goodenough house, the place not easy to miss, being a large rambling structure that looked almost gothic, with a sprawling wrap-around porch, a tower and turret, and a skirt of green cedar shingles climbing halfway up its sides. He swung the car

in to where he thought the edge of the road ought to be, made a slight miscalculation and felt the steering wheel leap as the front wheel bunted the curb. The car stalled. But this was close enough. He could wade the rest of the way.

He left the car and began walking. The water got steadily deeper as he progressed the last hundred yards down Harvest Street. Sloshing along through the water, ruining his shoes, he couldn't help but reflect that suicides were the most inconsiderate of people. They always seemed to pick the worst possible time to perform. He grunted. But then, so they ought to. Wasn't suicide said to be the supreme act of selfishness?

Angeline Goodenough opened the door to him in tears. He went upstairs and inspected her father's body—he was dead, all right—then came back down and sat on a wicker sofa on the front porch with her, not wanting, as he told her, to go on dripping water all over her clean floors and carpets. She was a compulsively fastidious housekeeper, not one thing out of its place.

"No more tears now?"

"No." She honked into a tissue.

"Right then," Robideau said, "tell me everything you can.

Right up to the moment you discovered the body."

She explained it to him. How she had put her father to bed the night before at his usual time, administering his usual warm milk and medication. No, he hadn't seemed upset or in any way different, just normal. She told how she had then gone to bed and had lain there listening to the storm, and had finally fallen asleep, awakening in the morning to find the house a virtual island in the middle of a lake.

That was not all she found. She began softly weeping again.

"I went upstairs to take him his breakfast, but when I opened the bedroom door, I seen that his bed was empty."

Robideau nodded.

"I was scared. Worried. I didn't know where he could be. I knew he wasn't in the bathroom because I have to pass the bathroom on my way along the hall, and the door had been open, and he hadn't been in there. So right away I figured—my god! I got me a walker!"

"I beg your pardon?"

She blinked.

"Sorry. That's what we called them at the home where I used to work. Walkers. Old folks who take it into their heads to get up and walk out of the place in their nightshirts. You have to watch for them, even tie them

down sometimes, see. It's something you always got to worry about."

"I can imagine. And had your father ever . . . er . . . *walked* before?"

"No. Never."

"I see. Go on."

"Yes. So I ran downstairs and went out on the porch and looked out. And when I seen just how much water there was all around the house, I got even more scared. I was afraid he had wandered off someplace, fallen down, and drowned." She hesitated, raising her hand to her mouth. "Only . . . only he hadn't. He . . ."

"Take your time."

She swallowed.

"Right then I seen the garage door standing open. I *never* leave the garage door open, especially at night. I . . . I didn't know what to think when I saw that, but I had to go out there and check up on it. So I went down into the water, waded out to the garage, and looked inside. And there he was! Hanging there!"

Here Angeline broke out into loud heartrending wails of grief, and Robideau had to get up and comfort her, patting her on one brawny shoulder and telling her, "There, there, there."

He left her on the porch to recover and went out to examine the garage. Inside he found a

length of stout twine floating on the water, one end of it still tied to the leg of the workbench. He could see by its length that it would just reach the rafter above it. The stepladder was folded and was hanging horizontally from two pegs on one wall.

Returning to the house, he asked Angeline why she had put the ladder away.

She seemed puzzled at first.

"The ladder?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Well, I put it away because—well, because I was waiting for you and I had to do something, didn't I?"

Robideau went back upstairs to make a more thorough inspection of the body. There was the length of twine still knotted around the neck, sunk deep into a red-blue welt. It was identical, as far as he could tell, to the twine that was still attached to the workbench out in the garage, and its free end, which lay twisted on the pillow, appeared to be sliced off just as cleanly. He did not doubt that it was the same twine. One pale foot of the corpse protruded from the sheets and he bent over it for a closer look, but it was unremarkable save for a bit of lint clinging to the wispy hairs on one ankle.

Finally, standing back against one wall he studied the



lay of the room, and the bed. The bed was truly an iron-runged monster. Although not a proper hospital bed, it was as high as one, a feature which no doubt Angeline had found to be advantageous. Still, the chief couldn't help thinking, I wouldn't want to fall off that damn thing, and that's a fact.

Back downstairs, he said sternly, "Angeline, I notice that your father's pajamas are dry."

She blinked at him. How dumb could he be?

"Well, of course they are. I changed him right away, didn't I?"

"You shouldn't have touched anything."

"Yes, yes, I know. But I couldn't leave him lying there in wet jammies, could I? It's not . . . not good for him . . ." She gave a great sob. "Oh, I know what you're getting at. But I guess I just wasn't thinking straight, see. I climbed the ladder and cut him down and carried him back upstairs and put him to bed. I realize I shouldn't have done any of that until you got here, but see, I've always taken care of him, and when I found him like that, it seemed only natural to . . . to . . ."

"I understand," Robideau said.

"I left the twine on him, though."

"I saw that. Do you mind if I use your telephone?"

She shook her head.

"And when I leave, do you want to come back with me?"

"No. I'll be fine."

The phone still worked. He called the doctor and then the funeral home. He splashed back to his car and turned the ignition switch, but there was no response. Not even a click. The starter was dead. Just as dead as Mr. Goodenough.

He got back out into the foot-deep water, shut the door of the car, and began wading up the hill towards Burton Street.

"So," Claudia Webb said to the chief, back at the office, "she found the ladder standing there, right under the beam, and so she climbed up it right away and cut her father's body down?"

Robideau nodded. "That's her story."

"You're not convinced?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't see how she could have managed it."

"She's a very strong woman . . ."

"Sure. But just the same, as thin as he is, her father can't be all that light. And for her to support his weight while she cut him loose, then manhandle him down a ladder, plow through all that water to the



house, and tote him up a flight of stairs and tuck him back into bed . . . well, that's quite a feat."

"So what's your point?"

"My point?"

"Are you saying she murdered him?"

Robideau took an antacid tablet from the desk, chewed and swallowed it.

"No, I'm not saying that. Murder by hanging is almost unheard of. And for obvious reasons. It's nearly impossible to accomplish. Take Angeline Goodenough. She'd have had to get the old man up that ladder somehow while he was still alive and kicking—I don't think he would have gone willingly. And doing that would have been even harder than carrying his dead body *down* the ladder." He picked up a pencil and fiddled with it. "But something still seems all wrong about it."

"What does?"

"The ladder, for one thing."

"What about it?"

"Why would she bother to put it away? And what did she do with the body while she did it? The place was flooded, don't forget."

"She could of gone back out to the garage and took care of it afterwards. Like she said, she had to do something to pass the time while she was waiting for you."

"Right . . ."

Claudia Webb sighed. "You know, I really don't see what your problem is. She's not only strong. She's a nurse. A trained nurse. Nurses are neat. They tidy up all the time. And taking care of her father all those years, it's only natural she'd of cut him down and moved him to a more comfortable spot the minute she found him hanging there like that. And don't forget, she understands how to haul patients around, lift them in and out of bathtubs, wheelchairs, beds. Nurses know how to handle dead weight."

"Yes," Robideau said, tapping the pencil against his chin. "Yes, they do, don't they?"

"You're all right, then?" he asked on the phone.

"Oh, I'm fine," Angeline said. "Just A-one. How else would I be after . . . you know . . . doing what you told me to do last night."

She heard him grunt. "Just a damn minute. You're the one that said you wished there was some way you could get rid of him. That's what you told me the night we met. So let's not rewrite the history books here, okay?"

She felt immediately apologetic. She just hated it when he got mad at her.

"So what do I do now?" she asked. It was important to let

him know that he still called the shots.

"You go through with the plan."

"But things are different. There's all this water around."

"The flood doesn't change a thing. You stick to what we agreed on. You don't change anything. You don't alter anything. You don't have any brainwaves. Is that understood?"

"It sounds awful simple."

"It is simple."

"Simple for you. You don't have Chief Robideau breathing down your neck." She changed her tone of voice. "Do you love me?"

"Madly."

"Are you gonna marry me?"

"Just as soon as I can."

"Are you gonna come out here soon?"

"It's best if I don't right now. But I have a boat if we need it."

"I hope it's a fast boat," she said.

**T**he chief leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping a cup of coffee and watching Mrs. Robideau spoon hot sunflower oil over two large pickerel fillets sizzling in the frying pan. He said to her:

"Tell me something. What do you think of Angeline Good-enough, taking such special care of her father all those

years? I mean, she practically gave up her entire life for him."

"What of it? That's what all women do. That's what I do for you. I sacrifice."

"Well, yes. But Angeline made an unusually dedicated effort along those lines, it seems to me. Which is why I was surprised at something she said to me."

"What's that?"

"She said that when she found his bed empty, the first thing she thought was, my God, I got me a walker."

"So? What's wrong with that?"

"On the face of it, nothing. But is it the sort of thing a person says about someone they love, in that situation?"

"I don't know about love. But she was his daughter. And she was a nurse. And so she looked after him. You could say it was her destiny, that's one way to look at it."

Robideau nodded. "Her destiny, yes. But look what she's missed. She could have got married. Raised her own family. But she gave all that up in order to take care of him, and here she is now, a middle-aged woman with no special person in her life, no one to look after her if her own health should fail, and all she's got to show for it is that crumbling old house."

"And a million dollars."

The chief raised his eyebrows. "What million dollars?"

"The million dollars her father was offered for that waterfront land he owns out north of town. He'd of got it, too, if he could of come to an agreement with those cottage developers like they wanted."

"Oh, that. But that was three or four years ago."

"So what? The lake's still there, isn't it? It hasn't gone anywhere, so far as I can tell. And I'm sure one or two of those developers are still skulking around somewheres, sitting in the bush, I wouldn't doubt, like a flock of carrion crows. They knew the old man wouldn't last forever. Now I'm sure they'll be only too happy to deal with the daughter." She slipped the fish out of the pan and onto two plates with a practiced swipe of the spatula. "Do you want lemon on this? Or vinegar, or just what?"

"Oh, lemon, absolutely," Chief Robideau said, sitting down at the table, reaching for the salt.

"You know what I bet?" Mrs. Robideau said.

"What?" the chief asked.

"I bet old Mr. Goodenough never showed any appreciation whatsoever for everything that girl did for him. None at all."

"You're not suggesting . . ."

"If I'm suggesting something,"

Mrs. Robideau said, "you'll be the first one to know it."

At Al's Gas-O-Hol on Burton Street, Robideau stood by his car and stared at Al's broad back and shoulders. That was all he could see of him, the big man's head shoved deep down into the engine compartment. Finally Al extricated his bulk from the machinery and, turning to Robideau, wiped his hands on a bright orange rag.

"She's gonna be fine. I'll just dry her out and clean all the electrical connections, and she'll be good as new. I can't do it right now, though. I got a ton of work with this storm."

"That's fine," Robideau said. "A car won't do me much good until the water goes down anyway. I figure I'll be scooting around in a boat for the next few days."

"Oh yeah? And where did you find one?"

"I made a long-term hire arrangement with the new End of Main taxi-boat service. Pete Melnychuk and company."

"Shoot," Big Al said with a laugh. "That oughtta be good. You might as well of hired the Marx Brothers."

Robideau grinned. "The Marx Brothers were my first choice, actually. But apparently they're dead. And as it happens, Pete and his pals work cheap."

"Well, you know best," Big Al said. "But me, I always figure you get what you pay for." And as the chief turned and started walking away down Burton Street, Big Al bellowed after him. "Too bad you couldn't walk on water, huh, chief?"

Kehoe's Hardware was crowded with customers. People wanted tarpaulins and waterproof caulking. Rubber boots and sump pumps were in high demand, but hip waders were moving briskly, too, and Robideau was lucky to get the last two pairs of them. He snugged the bulky bag under his arm and walked across the street to the Netley Hotel, ready to scare up his new transportation.

He found Pete Melynchuk and Wilmer Gates sitting at their usual table with another citizen, old Wolverton.

"Siddown an' take a load off, chief," Pete said, pushing a chair out for Robideau with his foot. They were all grizzled men, but Pete was the grizzliest. "Wilmer, slide a beer over for our new customer."

"Our only customer," Wilmer said.

"Are you bragging or complaining?" Pete smiled at the chief and winked. "Never mind Wilmer. That's how he gets when he's been sober too long." He shifted closer to the chief.

"We was having an argument here—a disagreement, I guess you'd call it—an' you're just the guy to set these two guys straight about something."

"What's that?"

"Old man Goodenough. That's who we're talkin' about. We heard that he hanged hisself. Is that fact correct?"

Robideau looked with amazement at these inveterate gossips. You couldn't keep a thing from them. The notion was impossible. He had to say something, but he would be noncommittal.

"It looks as though he could have."

"What's that's supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. That he could have."

"Oh, horse poop, chief, don't give us that. He's got a big blue welt around his neck," Pete said. "He must of hung hisself. He didn't get that way from eating razor blades."

They must have spies, Robideau reasoned, at Kroeker's funeral home. That had to be it. There was no other explanation.

"Anyways," Pete continued, "I say he hung hisself. Wolverton says it might of been a Boston-type strangler got him, an' Wilmer's tryin' to tell the both of us the old man strangled his ownself with his own two hands."

Now, you're the expert. That's impossible, right? To take and strangle yourself?"

"I only said he *could* of," Wilmer said. "I didn't say he actually did it."

"Oh, so you're changing your story, now we got the chief sittin' here."

"I'm not changing my story. I said he *could* of strangled himself. Anybody *could* strangle themselves, that's what I'm trying to say."

"Well, I got a plan. Why don't you strangle yourself. Do it right here in front of us," Pete suggested, "and then we'll consider you an expert, okay?"

"You fellows drink up," Robideau told them. "I need your services. I've got places to go, and you're going to get me there."

The boat was an open eighteen foot fiberglass Fisherman, and smelled like it. There was a forty-horse Johnson on the transom, a two cylinder that was running on one, belching small clouds of blue smoke and barely able to shove the boat through the water.

"Don't worry," Pete Melynchuk assured Chief Robideau with a wink, "she'll be just fine once we blow the crabs out of her."

They limped over the floodwaters to the Goodenough house, their passage a mild riot of ex-

plosions and oily smokeclouds. But at least they were moving, Robideau thought, and the breeze took the smell of the fish away.

Angeline Goodenough was on the phone again. And this time she was smiling, Cort telling her what a sexy voice she had.

"No one ever told me that before," she informed him sweetly. "Do I actually sound like Whitney Houston?"

"You sure do, girl. Her and Madonna, both rolled into one. Now listen to me. About that cop you got snooping around. I don't want you to worry about him. You know he can't prove anything. Like I told you before, you just stick to your knitting and everything'll be fine."

"But he keeps asking questions."

"He's supposed to ask questions. That's his job, asking questions. When he's asked enough questions, he'll figure he's earned his pay. But he can't change the facts. And murderers don't hang people. Every policeman knows that."

She felt a cold wave pass through her.

"I'm *not* a murderer. It was an act of mercy."

"And I *know* that, sweetheart. I just mean he can't *think* that you are."

"You don't believe he's suspicious?"

"Well, of course he's suspicious. That's also his job, being suspicious about everything. There isn't a cop alive who isn't suspicious. It's their nature. Which is why it don't mean anything. Now let's talk about your father's will—you're the only beneficiary, right?"

"Who else is there?"

"Well, I don't know. He might have left everything to some weird foundation."

"I'm the only foundation he ever had."

"You don't think he excluded you, though?"

"Of course not. Why would he?"

"I don't know why he would. I'm only asking, that's all." Cort paused a moment, then said as if thinking out loud, "You never can tell with old folks. He was a awful contrary back when we first brought our lakefront development proposal to him."

Angeline sighed. She wanted to continue talking about herself and the many ways in which she resembled certain famous and glamorous women. But she knew from experience that Cort would now go on for several minutes about the proposal. He was hopeless that way. He had been brooding about it for years. He had worked for that developer all that time ago

and still couldn't get the offer he had helped to submit to her father out of his mind. What did it matter now? The property was hers. Or at least it very soon would be.

She let Cort ramble on.

Her attention wandered to the window, and from the window to the brand-new lake that shone out there beyond the glass. Lake Goodenough. Now, there was a name for it. Except that she'd had enough water to last her a lifetime. What she ought to do was sell everything off and then take Cort to a dry climate. Arizona, maybe. Somewhere . . .

She suddenly sucked in her breath so hard that Cort caught the sound of it at the other end of the line and snapped, "Angie, what's wrong?"

She could hardly speak.

"It's that policeman! He's coming back here again!"

"Angie, listen. Stay calm. Remember what I told you . . ."

"But I see him! He's coming up the street in a boat! It's slowing down now! It's almost here! He . . ."

She slammed down the telephone in a reflex action. It was as if for an instant she'd almost believed that Chief Robideau would be able to tell whom she'd been talking to, catch Cort's electronic scent in the air or something. She closed her eyes

for a moment very tight, then got up and went nervously to the door. When she heard the tread of feet on the porch, she slipped on her rubber boots and went out, pushing open the screen.

The chief was standing there with an affable smile on his face.

"Ms. Goodenough," he greeted her, "sorry to bother you, but there are a few more questions I have to ask."

She nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"I'll be brief. When your father went out of the house in the rain like that, did he bother to pull on a pair of boots? Was he wearing shoes, do you know, or even slippers? Can you help me with that, Ms. Goodenough?"

"No. I mean, yes. He was barefoot, Chief Robideau."

The chief looked unhappy.

"Well now, that's a problem."

"What do you mean, a problem?"

"The soles of his feet, you see. They looked very clean and unblemished to me when I saw them. I mean, going out on a night like that, stumbling around in the dark, setting things up for himself in the garage—you'd just think his feet would have got bruised and dirty, that's all. It got me wondering if I could check out the

shoes he wore. To see if they were marked, or anything. That's all."

Angeline began to get angry. Oddly, it made her feel more in control of herself.

"Chief Robideau. Are you saying you don't believe he went out to the garage under his own steam? Is that what you're getting at? Of course he went out there. He had to. That's where I found him, isn't it?"

The big policeman shrugged his shoulders. Angeline looked past him and saw the boat that had brought him putt-putting lazily fifty yards out on the water. Probably not out of earshot, though. Sound carried wonderfully over water. *This* was bound to be the talk of the town tomorrow, wasn't it? She said:

"And the water would have washed his feet clean, now, wouldn't it? And I *carried* him back to the house in my arms, after all!"

"Well, that's what you told me, all right, Ms. Goodenough. I only wanted something that would confirm it. For the record, that's all. You see, there's nothing else I can go by. You already told me that you changed his pajamas, and so naturally they'd be all dried out by this time . . ."

"You better believe it. They're folded and put away in his drawer. I ran them through the



wash. They were filthy, Chief Robideau, just filthy."

"Right. But not his feet?"

He looked at her. She wanted to slap him. Send him reeling clear off the porch into the water.

"Is that the only thing that's bothering you?" she asked.

"Well, not the only thing. But like I said, it would help if I had something to back up your version of things, that's all. You know how it is when a life is lost. There are all kinds of questions, all kinds of forms to fill in."

He kept standing there, like a pesky dog that won't leave the door of a butcher shop. Angeline decided she'd better do something. Come up with an answer. She clapped her hands together.

"Chief," she said, "I believe you're right after all. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. My father did have a pair of boots on his feet. What I mean is, he must have done. You see, I found these ones floating around out there in the garage right afterwards."

She pointed to the boots on her own feet.

The chief looked down at them. His eyebrows climbed slowly up. "These same boots, Ms. Goodenough?"

"Yes. The very same. I was flustered, as I told you, and I guess I forgot about them until

you made me think. You're welcome to look at them. I don't know what you'll learn from them, though."

Before he could say anything she squatted down, slipped the boots off and handed them over to him. He turned them around in his big hands, examining the soles, the uppers, then shoved his hands deep inside them as if he were searching for something.

"They were floating, you say?"

"Yes. Upside down. There was air trapped inside them."

She smiled sweetly at him.

"Can I keep these for a few days, Ms. Goodenough?"

"Of course you can. I got another pair."

He thanked her, then turned and waved to the boat, which immediately sputtered, came toward them, and nudged up against the porch. He clambered into it, and gave her a courteous nod. Then he was carried away, still clutching the boots, toward the high and dry ground of Burton Street.

She immediately spun around and stormed into the house. She jabbed the buttons of the phone with trembling fingers.

"Cort," she hissed. "You get right on over here! Quick!"

"Damn," Wilmer said softly. He had been trying to jimmy another cold beer out of his

knapsack without Robideau's spotting him and had somehow managed to topple the bag and its contents over the side of the boat. It had gone into the water with a plop, and having a full load of Black Label for ballast, it had immediately sunk straight to the bottom. Pete Melynychuk circled back to the spot, then shut off the motor to let Wilmer attempt the salvage operation. A single bubble rolled up. Wilmer probed with his paddle, attempting to snag the thing, but each time he got it more or less into position, the paddle would drift sideways on him, difficult to control.

Robideau sat in the middle of the open boat watching the small drama with his right hand thrust deep inside one of the boots, Wilmer probing with the wooden paddle, fighting its buoyancy, and generally having a rough time of things.

After Wilmer had made a number of attempts, Robideau said idly to Pete Melynychuk, "You know, it's funny, but it's sometimes the little things that start you thinking along the right track."

"I don't follow you, chief."

"Well, here we were chugging along, almost back to Burton Street, and I didn't feel all that comfortable with what's supposed to have happened to old Mr. Goodenough but I was

ready to sit down at my desk and write the thing up with what I had. Then that bag fell overboard. I've got no choice but to sit here and watch Wilmer try to recover it, and I'm fiddling with the boots, and that's when I realize something."

"Realize what, chief?" Pete looked away to holler at the front of the boat, "What's the holdup there, Wilmer?"

"The holdup? Well, Jeez! This isn't near as easy as it looks, you know. See? You get the paddle just about where you want it, and—man!—there it goes again. It's practically hopeless."

"You're hopeless. Get the lead out!"

Robideau no longer had any interest in Wilmer's predicament. He caught Pete's eye. "Start the engine."

"Huh? Where we going now?"

"I want you to take me back to Harvest Street. I just thought of something else I want to run by Angeline Goodenough."

**T**he daylight was failing unnaturally fast. The dark overcast that stubbornly hung over the town was seeing to that. But there was no wind, and the expanse of water separating the houses looked like a sheet of mercury, a shimmering gun-metal gray in the waning light. The scene was surreal, the

houses appearing to spring out of a silvery sea. The Good-enough place appeared strangest of all as they approached it, perhaps because it was the largest, or perhaps because its neo-gothic styling was more suited to the eeriness than the ranch-style bungalows on either side of it.

As they neared the place, Pete throttled back.

"What the heck's this?" Wilmer Gates suddenly asked, turning to show them the rusted steel wheel rim he had dug out of the bow. He rested its weight on the gunwale as he looked at them, and the next instant it had slipped over the side, going into the water with a tremendous splash, a bright yellow polyethylene rope chasing after it.

Pete killed the engine. "What's the matter with you today?" he snapped. "That's the damn anchor you just tossed overboard this time. You expect the chief to swim the rest of the way? Haul it back in!"

"Sorry," Wilmer said apologetically, "it didn't look like an anchor." He bent over the rope and pulled hard but could not raise it.

"Sumbitch is stuck," he said.

There was no doubt about it. The anchor was caught fast.

Pete Melynychuk snarled with irritation.

"Wilmer, you jerk!"

Wilmer responded heatedly.

"How was I to know what the damn thing was! Nobody said nothing to me about it. And if I can't pull it in, don't blame me it got snagged! Next thing I know, you'll be blaming me for the rainstorm!"

"Never mind. This is close enough," Robideau said.

While the other two struggled in the bow with the obstinate anchor, he pulled a pair of the hip waders on over his trousers, jerked the straps across his shoulders, and cautiously let himself over the side. Going down into the water, he could feel the sudden chill of it, the firm pressure against his legs. His feet touched bottom, leaving him in water that was about waist deep. He took the spare pair of waders out of the boat—he would need them for this—then turned away and began to push through the water toward the Goodenough house.

"Hey," Pete called after him, "where you going with them other waders? We might need 'em to get Wilmer's damn anchor unsnagged."

"My anchor!" Wilmer shot back. "How come it's my anchor all of a sudden?"

"You dropped it, didn't you? Just like you dropped the beer out of the boat!"

"What's the beer got to do with it?"

"I could use a beer, couldn't I, watching you screw things up

... Their squabbling faded as the chief waded on down the street. He reached the intersection of Harvest and Elm Street, then angled across it toward his destination. He felt carefully for the curbstone where he thought it ought to be, located it, stepped up, and slogged ahead warily. God only knew what could be lying in wait for a careless step in this turgid water. An open manhole, with his luck.

Trailing a miniwake of his own, he moved on towards Angeline's front steps, fumbled his way up them, and at last stood dripping on the porch, a few inches above the water. This time there was a Lund aluminum boat tied to one end of the porch railing, an eighteen-footer with a black Mercury engine mounted on it. Robideau raised his eyebrows. He hadn't noticed it the last time he was here. And he hadn't been aware that the Goodenoughs owned a boat.

He turned back to the door, about to knock when he saw a glow bobbing towards him through the cut, frosted glass. The door opened, and he was confronted by Angeline Goodenough, glaring fiercely out at

him and holding a flashlight in her hand.

"Yes, chief, what is it this time?"

Robideau smiled at her. Clearly he had worn out his welcome with her. And she seemed more in control of herself this time. He came right to the point.

"I was halfway home," he said, "when it occurred to me there was one other matter I'd forgotten to cover. The garage, Ms. Goodenough. Where it happened. I've been out there myself, of course, but meant to have you show it to me and, you know, point out to me just exactly how things were when you found your father."

She closed her eyes, pressed her hand to her breast.

"Chief Robideau. Excuse me. But I thought you were through here. This is very unsettling for me."

"I realize that, Ms. Goodenough. And I wouldn't ask you, believe me, if there was any way around it. But it's one of those things that just has to be done. One of the details for my final report, you understand."

"But the garage is still under water."

He held out the spare waders.

She pinched her lips together.

He waited on the porch while, inside the house, Angeline put on the waders. When she re-

emerged, looking chunkier than ever and with the exasperated look still fixed on her face, he led her down the steps into the water, and together they sloshed over to the garage. The chief heaved one of the two big swinging doors open, making a small wave on the water. Inside there were boxes and boards and a plastic pop bottle floating around. He found the twine tied to the bench, and his eyes turned upwards.

"That's the rafter you say he was hanging from?"

"No. It's the rafter he *was* hanging from, Chief Robideau."

He looked at her.

"Yes, of course. Now then, that rafter would be maybe—I don't know—maybe eight feet from the floor if there was no water in here." He frowned, doing his sums. "The water is about three feet deep, so clearly, even with the water, there's room for him to have hanged himself, your father not being a tall man."

She seemed to consider this for the first time, then caught herself.

"You mean you doubted it? You were thinking the water could have supported his weight and kept him from strangling? Well, I'm sorry to have to disappoint you, Chief Robideau."

"No, I wasn't thinking that at all, Ms. Goodenough. Not at

all." He looked away. "Now, that ladder hanging there on those two pegs, is that the one he used? You mentioned you'd put it away, so I guess it's the same one, right? I wonder if you'd humor me and just position it where you found it when you first came into the garage."

"What for?"

"So I can get a clearer idea of how things were."

She looked doubtful. Suspicious.

"I was very upset when I came into the garage."

"I appreciate that. But do your best. It doesn't have to be in exactly the same place."

The chief held the flashlight for her as Angeline waded to the wall of the garage. She lifted the stepladder down from its pegs with one hand, then turned and dragged it through the water to a point approximately in the middle of the floor, just adjacent to the corner of the bench that had the twine tied to it. To keep it clear of the water, she held it horizontal as she scissored it open, using her hip as a fulcrum. It made a sharp click as the locking mechanism snapped into place.

"That's fine," Robideau said. "Now, if you would, set it in place for me, please."

Angeline changed her grip. She seized the opened ladder at

the top, near its apex, and lowered it into the water.

"That's fine, Ms. Goodenough. Now stand away from it, please."

Angeline stepped back. She let go of the ladder, and it bobbed up several inches. It continued to rise, tilted slowly sideways, and then fell over. They watched it drift gently away.

The chief looked at Angeline Goodenough.

"This was the thing that was bothering me, only I couldn't quite put my finger on it at the time," he said. "And also those boots you gave me were dry right through to the linings. They must have got *some* water in them if he kicked them off in here. I used to own a pair of boots like that, and whenever their linings got wet, it took at least a week for them to get completely dry."

Angeline returned his gaze. She looked at him, and then at the ladder. Emotions were at war deep in her eyes. She seemed to be struggling to find a clear explanation but couldn't think of one. Finally she spoke.

"You bastard," she breathed.

She took something from the bench, he saw a glint of steel, and her hand shot out sideways and whipped past his chest; glancing down, he saw that the front of his jacket was slashed

open, and then he saw the wicked, curved blade of the carpet knife in her fist. Then she was at him again, trying to finish the job, and to save himself he threw himself backwards with an enormous splash. The knife flashed by again, this time missing him by inches.

Suddenly a boat was nosing into the garage, its outboard engine snarling and popping. It was the Lund that had been tied to the porch. Robideau hadn't even heard it start. It swung around sharply, practically showing them its keel, and put its transom toward them. Angeline surged forward and heaved herself aboard, shedding water like an elephant seal and leaving her hip waders behind.

The Lund snorted, stood up sharply, and roared off, leaving the chief to splash out of the garage and wave frantically for Pete and Wilmer to come pick him up.

**T**he Lund followed the swollen river, leaving the outskirts of the waterlogged harbor and roaring toward the marsh. A harbor buoy, the last man-made object in sight, sailed past, and Robideau asked Pete for more speed. But the old outboard engine was already wide open, belching a streamer of blue smoke and sounding as if it

were going to fly apart. There was little light to see by.

"If they get deep into those reeds, we may never find them," the chief hollered.

Pete nodded. He couldn't argue. Netley Marsh was a huge one, over twenty miles on a side. Within it were hundreds of islands, thousands of reedbanks, and channels that meandered in every direction. Many people had been lost there. A military plane had gone down in it years before and had never been seen again.

The chief saw Pete dragging a shotgun out from under the seat and prodded his shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing with that?"

Pete grinned. "Relax, chief. It's a spare paddle. An' we're gonna need it if we run out of gas."

The chief glanced worriedly at the five gallon tank. This was something that hadn't occurred to him: the possibility of running out of fuel.

"How much have we got?"

Pete kicked Wilmer, jerked a thumb at the tank, and Wilmer nodded and spun its cap off, giving it a shake and then peering inside it. He turned to them displaying two fingers an inch apart.

Well, Robideau thought, however long one inch of gas would last, it was going to have to do

them. Maybe the Lund was low on fuel, too. One could always hope.

The Lund had easily increased its lead and vanished behind a reedbank with a white flash of transom, disappearing from view. Pete's old Fisherman labored after it, bouncing ponderously over the chop.

Entering the reeds at the same point, they were forced to throttle back immediately. The channel wound ahead crookedly, and it was impossible to see more than fifty yards ahead of them. There had been terrible accidents here in the past, the chief knew; joyriders at blind corners cutting other boats in half. But at least the Lund's speed advantage no longer counted against them. They came to a fork, and Pete took the wider path. Another fork, and he did so again. Robideau was worried. He shook Pete by the arm.

"I'm afraid we might lose them. Can we shut off the engine and listen?"

Pete looked doubtful.

"Sure we can. Shutting down is easy. Getting going again is the problem."

"I know that. But we have to risk it."

Pete slowed, then killed the engine. It coughed, then died with a labored wheeze. Old Mr. Goodenough hadn't died that



easily. You didn't wheeze very well when your throat was completely choked off. Robideau wondered how Angeline had accomplished it. Not by hand, he was sure. So then how?

He remembered the bed. Its height from the floor. Its stout iron-barred frame. And he thought, yes, it is just possible. Perhaps not with a strong healthy victim, but with Mr. Goodenough, just possible. She'd have had to keep his body up off the floor somehow for it to work; that meant securing his feet. And it would have been slow. A very slow strangulation. Robideau shivered. He didn't want to get old.

It was quiet now. So suddenly quiet. He could hear geese cackling off their port bow, and the wind sighed smoothly among the reeds. And then the sound he had been hoping for—an engine at a quiet idle.

There was no doubt about it. It was an outboard throttled back almost to a stall, muttering quietly somewhere off to their left.

Pete hefted his scattergun, his blue eyes watchful.

"You're not to use that thing, except in defense," Robideau told him sternly.

"Hell, that's like bein' one a them U.N. peacekeepers," Pete Melynychuk pouted. "You can't shoot anyone 'less they shoot

you first." He shut up and passed out two paddles. Wilmer and the chief began to scull the boat toward the grumble of the idling engine.

"Sound plays funny tricks on a man out here," Pete cautioned them. He had the gun cradled comfortably in his lap. He might have been a duck hunter. "You think something's close, and it's actually far off. You think something's far off, and it's actually—"

There was a *crack*, and something whined off the outboard cowl. An engine bellowed, and the Lund was driving out of the reeds at them, practically standing on its tail. It surged past, dealing the Fisherman a glancing blow, and the chief caught a glimpse of Angeline's frightened face just as Pete's old blunderbuss gave a deafening roar. The next instant he was toppling backward.

The cold water was a shock. The chief bobbed up and saw that the Lund was gone again, once more lost in the reeds. Treading water, he could see Wilmer frantically trying to get the engine of the Fisherman going again, practically standing on top of it and pulling the starter cord with both hands.

"We musta got 'em!" he yelled. "We musta got 'em!"

"Hey!" Robideau heard the shout, and saw Pete Melynychuk

treading water beside him, shaking droplets out of his eyes and bellowing angrily at Wilmer's broad back. "Hey, you dumb arse, can't you see we're drownin' out here?"

Wilmer turned and seemed to notice for the first time that he was alone in the boat. He came to the side and dragged each of them in, first Pete, then the chief, leaving them sprawled on the boards, coughing and spitting up marsh water.

"Fine time for a swim," Wilmer said, and went back to pulling the starter cord. The old outboard coughed and finally rumbled. Wilmer twisted the throttle, and then they were moving again. "We musta got 'em," Wilmer said again to nobody in particular.

Robideau heaved his rear end up on a seat and found he was freezing cold, trembling, the wind slicing through his wet clothes. He hugged himself for warmth.

"Jeez, there they are!" Wilmer called in triumph. "We *did* get 'em. I was right!"

It was true. The Lund was ten yards off, completely dead in the water. It was listing hard to one side, the occupants waving wildly.

Wilmer cackled with glee.

"You blew a hole in her, Pete, you old scow-scuttler, you!"

"See, all's we figure is, we

ought to get a bonus or somethin'," Pete said to the chief. He was scrutinizing the check Claudia Webb had handed him, plainly dispirited at the amount. "I mean, we caught a murderer for you—"

"Alleged murderer," the chief corrected him.

"Whatever. And we saved your life—"

"I saved his life," Wilmer Gates said heatedly. "An' I saved yours, too, while I was at it."

"Will you shut up? Can't you see I'm tryin' to get us a bit more money? We had expenses. I lost my shotgun—a real collector's item . . ."

"A real garage-sale item," Robideau told him. "And you can try to get more money out of me all day, but we had a contract. You were hired by the hour, and so I'm paying you by the hour."

"An' we lost the beer. . . ." Pete continued ruefully.

"Give them another fifty, Claudia," said the chief. And he closed the door after the two as they slouched out of the office, Pete clutching the second check happily and giving Wilmer the elbow.

"So what clued you in to her?" Claudia asked, locking the checkbook back in her desk. "What made you go back to the house for that one last talk with her?"

"Well," Robideau said, "as I told you, something was bother-

ing me. Right from the start I felt that. Then, sitting in the boat and watching Wilmer try to hold his paddle under water, and seeing how difficult it was, it suddenly dawned on me just what the problem was. Angeline couldn't have seen the ladder standing there under the rafter the day after the storm. It would have floated. But on the other hand, somebody had climbed up and cut the twine, all right, and so that must have been done the day *before* the storm. *Before Mr. Goodenough was killed.* I had to go back to check out my theory, just to make sure."

"So how did she do it, then?"

"She hanged him from the bed frame. It wasn't actually a hanging, though; a slow strangulation is more what it was. The interruption of the blood flow to the brain. She kept his feet off the floor by tying them with a pillowcase to the foot of the bed, and she let him hang down the side of the bed till he stopped squirming. It must have taken a while. She probably left him there the rest of the night."

"Why not just let it go at that, then? Claim he committed suicide that way? Forget all that business with the ladder out there in the garage?"

"Because her plan—hers and the young fellow's—was to di-

vert suspicion at all costs. No one would suspect her of hanging her father from a rafter eight feet in the air. That would have been an unlikely feat. But hang him from the bed frame? Well, she could do that, all right. And people would know she could." The chief reached out and straightened his wet clothes where they hung, drying, from the coat rack; the coveralls the janitor had lent him were surprisingly comfortable. "But they didn't count on the flood. And in the morning, with the old man dead upstairs, they had no choice but to go through with their plan. Stick to it and hope things worked out for them."

"If they'd known," Claudia said, "they'd of probably drowned the man."

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it. That girl would of done it. She felt unappreciated. She was ready to do something." Claudia was switching out lights and pulling her coat on. "I'm going now. Coming to work twice in one day is enough for anybody. I'll drop you off if you like. How's your stomach?"

"A lot better," Robideau said. "But can we stop at the drug-store anyway? I thought I might take Mrs. Robideau a box of chocolates. You see, I got to thinking. I'd hate for her feel she's not appreciated . . ."

FICTION

FICTION

FICTION



# MASSACRE ON 34TH STREET

Terry Day and Alan Gordon

Illustration by Jim Odvert

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

Mystery Magazine 1/96

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Santa Claus lay dying.  
"How was I supposed to know he was Santa?" demanded Mrs. Rettinger indignantly as the paramedic frantically sliced through layers of padding in an effort to find the bullet wounds. "He's supposed to come through the chimney, not the window."

"You don't have a chimney, ma'am," remarked Detective Edwards wearily. "And he's not really Santa Claus."

"I'm lying in bed, half asleep," she continued, ignoring him. "I see out of the corner of my eye this huge silhouette on the fire escape; then he comes through the window. I let him have it with both barrels. I turn on the light, and I've killed Santa. Imagine how I feel."

"This is a revolver, ma'am. It only has one barrel. And he's not really Santa Claus." The paramedic was heaving handfuls of blood-stained cotton across the room and finally made it to Santa's abdomen. Mrs. Rettinger had placed four of her six shots in prime target area, observed the detective. Not bad for sleepy shooting.

"I've got a right to shoot any creep who comes in my bedroom window," shouted Mrs. Rettinger. "Even if it's Santa Claus."

"He's not really Santa Claus!" Edwards shouted back. "There is no Santa Claus!" Mrs. Rettinger looked betrayed, and the other police officers in the room looked at him reproachfully.

"Detective, he wants to speak to you," said the paramedic. He motioned the detective to where Santa was lying. Blood was trickling out of his mouth, vividly staining the fluffy white beard. Edwards put his ear down to catch what he was trying to say.

"Ho, ho, ho," whispered Santa weakly. Then his eyes closed.

The paramedic worked on him for another minute, then looked up at Edwards and shrugged.

"Too weird," muttered one of the uniforms.

"Okay, we'll wait for Crime Scene now that this sick puppy's dead. Doris, want to take Mrs. Rettinger down to the station and give her a cup of coffee until I get there?"

"I'm not dressed for going out," complained Mrs. Rettinger.

"Ma'am, I appreciate that. Select what you need, but we're going to have to take over your apartment for a couple of hours."

"Am I going to need a lawyer?" she asked suspiciously.

Edwards shook his head. "As long as you have a license for that gun, you're okay. It's a clean shoot."

She reached into her night table drawer and pulled out a license. Edwards looked at it and handed it back.





actors, perverts, and winos found employment as that most beloved of icons. Minimum wages paid to entice children and their normally frugal parents into baring their innermost desires as well as the secrets of their PIN's. And the begging Santas, the Krishna Santas horning in on the longtime Salvation Army turf, spurious Santas from scam religions, drug-dealing Santas, mugger Santas, rival Santas duking it out in Herald Square for the sake of a good corner location. The masses of men who lead lives of jolly desperation.

At least there's one less. He quashed the thought as being uncharitable and unprofessional. Still, the guy deserved it. The question was, why did he want to kill Mrs. Rettinger?

The answer was not waiting for him at the precinct when he got there, although Mrs. Rettinger was, chatting with his partner over two cups of lethal java.

"How are you feeling, ma'am?" he inquired.

"A little better, thanks. This is good coffee."

Lady has one strong stomach, he thought. "Doris, any reason why anyone would want to burglarize this lady?"

"Can't find one, Harry," said his partner, looking through her notes. "She really doesn't own anything worth taking this kind of risk. Most valuable possession is a fur coat . . ."

"Given to me by my late husband, Jerry," explained Mrs. Rettinger. "It's gorgeous, almost genuine mink, dyed strawberry."

"When did your husband die, ma'am?" asked Edwards.

"Six years ago next Tuesday," she said. "Lovely man. I miss him most this time of year."

"I'm sorry, ma'am." He thought hard about how to phrase his next question, gave up and asked it directly. "Mrs. Rettinger, can you think of any reason why someone might want to kill you?"

"Me?" gasped Mrs. Rettinger. "But I never did nothing to nobody."

"Any family problems? Any rich relatives who might leave you something? Ever hit anyone with a car?"

She shook her head furiously. "Mister, I live off Jerry's pension and my SSI. Once a month I take the seniors bus to Atlantic City and sit in front of a slot machine until my roll of quarters runs out. Most I ever won was eighty bucks, and I spent that on a Swedish massage."

"Oh, those are good, aren't they?" sighed Doris. Edwards looked back and forth at the two of them as they launched into a detailed comparison of backrubbing techniques.



A uniform rapped quietly on the door and handed him a piece of paper and a fax of a photograph. He looked at them for a moment.

"That was three questions," she said.

"He sure did," commented Doris admiringly. She escorted the woman out, then came back to look at the dead perp. "He's got a sheet," she observed. "Big surprise."

"A mob guy? Maybe he takes his hits on the road. And he got the wrong apartment, like you said."

"There's a day shift?" exclaimed Doris. "Where do I sign up?"

He grimaced and went home.

A message left with Detroit PD brought him a call in the late afternoon from a puzzled detective named Brown.

"What was Frankie Merola doing in the Apple?" he asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me," said Edwards. "He got offed by an honest citizen when he broke into her apartment with a knife."

"Bizarre. He's small potatoes around here, not even a made man. Ran some local establishments, did a little laundering, never came near the rough stuff as far as we know."

"Did he owe any big bucks?"

"Yeah, come to think of it. My source told me one of his operations got hit for a lot of money, and he was being held personally responsible. We were hoping maybe he'd come to us."

"Maybe he was working off the debt with some extracurricular activity."

"Could be. If you find out, let me know."

Edwards hung up, no more enlightened than he had been.

"I think we should back-burner it, don't you?" said Doris when he filled her in. "I talked to the D.A., and they agreed it was a clean

and righteous. And we got enough unsolved bodies to keep us busy for the holiday season."

"Yeah, okay," he said, resigned, and they wandered around the area, asking pointless questions of unhelpful citizens. Then, around eight thirty, they got a call that sent them flying back to Mrs. Rettinger's apartment.

Santa Claus lay dead on the floor. In his hand was a length of rope, just right for strangling.

"Isn't this where we came in?" whispered Doris.

"I know the M.E.'s backed up," muttered Edwards. "But you'd think they would have gotten the body out of here by now."

Mrs. Rettinger sat wailing on her bed, wearing the same flannel nightgown she'd had on the previous night, holding the same gun.

"What's going on here?" she screamed, gesturing with the gun in a way that sent half the room diving for cover. Edwards peeked cautiously over the side of the bed and gently removed it from her hand.

"I just had the wall replastered this morning," she continued. "Now look at it!"

They looked. A new hole was in the wall, not far from the patches filling in the two holes from the night before. The other five holes were in Santa.

"Her shooting's improved," he pointed out to Doris.

"Practice makes perfect," she whispered.

"It was just like last night," said Mrs. Rettinger when they talked to her at the precinct. "I hadn't gotten the window latch fixed yet. And he came through so fast. Thank God I had remembered to reload."

The Lord works in mysterious ways, thought Edwards. "Ma'am, maybe you should sleep somewhere else until we figure out what's going on here."

"But that's my home!" she shouted. "And I will not be driven out of there by any petty hoodlum."

"But why do you stay there when it's so dangerous?"

"Because it's rent-controlled," she replied, and this being New York, the answer made sense to all of them.

Another faxed photo came in. He showed it to her, she shook her head, and they let her go. He gave it to Doris.

"From Milwaukee this time," she read. "Charles Santucci. A bookie. We call in the morning?"

"You bet."

Sanucci turned out to be another small-time hood, again with no history of burglary or violent behavior.

"Let's go back to the building," suggested Edwards. "We haven't checked out the wrong apartment theory."

They went to Mrs. Rettinger's first, but she wasn't home.

"Probably out buying more ammo," said Doris. "Let's find the super."

The super provided them with a list of the apartments and the tenants' names. There were fifty apartments to cover. They spent the rest of the morning knocking on doors and asking questions. Most of the tenants were out. One old lady, however, provided them with an interesting bit of information.

"Poor Shirley," she said sympathetically. "Going through all this, and right around the anniversary of when Jerry was killed."

"Killed?" said Edwards. "I didn't know he was killed. She just said he died."

"Well, when you're killed, you die," said the old lady.

"This is true," conceded Edwards. "How did it happen?"

"A hit-and-run," she said. "They never found the driver."

They thanked her and went back to the precinct.

Doris spoke first. "So it's around the anniversary of her husband's death, and two mob guys from out of town show up dressed as Santa trying to kill her. What's the connection?"

"The Santa suits are the weird part. Someone's trying to send her a message. You want the suits or the tenants?"

"I'll take the tenants. I'm faster with the computer than you are."

He called around to some of the other precincts, looking for any seasonal Santa crimes. A detective from the 5th Precinct RIP Unit called looking for a Santa who held up a liquor store.

"Got any description?" asked Edwards.

"Yeah. Red face, little round belly, shook when he laughed . . ." Edwards hung up.

Neither of the Santa suits carried any manufacturer's tags. Edwards started calling costume stores and tracing wholesalers. No one reported any overdue or stolen suits.

"But that wouldn't necessarily mean anything," he told Doris at the end of the afternoon. "Someone could have rented them for the month, which is the usual practice for Santa suits. Or bought them used. Or paid cash. It's not like there's a law saying you have to leave your name and address when you buy one. Although the way

things have been going lately, maybe there should be a seven day waiting period. Any luck with you?"

"Negatory," said Doris. "Nobody in the building has any kind of sheet with us or the Feds. I can't find any reason anyone would want to hit anyone else there. Not that it doesn't exist, but we don't have it. Oh, and I checked the hit-and-run file on the late Jerry Rettinger. He was an accountant, small-time, and no foul play was suspected at the time."

"Maybe we should reopen it. Tomorrow. Meantime, let's load up a couple of thermos bottles with coffee and stake out the building. As much as I admire the good work she's been doing, a little preventive maintenance seems to be in order."

No good deed goes unpunished, he thought later. The wind was whipping unobstructed across the rooftop, and the coffee wasn't doing anything except expanding his bladder. Doris was in the alley in back, checking in on the point-to-point every ten minutes. It was around nine thirty, and he was just about to call her to switch posts when he heard something moving nearby. He crept around the elevator shed and saw Santa lowering himself onto the roof from a neighboring building. Edwards drew his gun.

"Up on the rooftop, click, click . . ." he sang, and cocked his gun for the final click. Santa turned around, saw the gun and shield, and immediately raised his hands.

"Now, about that chemistry set you never brought me," continued Edwards as he approached. "I've always been a bit bitter about that. And the Creepy Crawler set. I won't even mention the pony."

"It wasn't me," said Santa, looking a bit worried.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back," ordered Edwards. Santa tried to comply, but his hands couldn't get close enough for safety. Edwards radioed Doris to join him, and they linked their cuffs together to make a shackle long enough to hold Santa. Edwards patted the suit down thoroughly, felt something hard, and reached through the padding to discover a lead pipe.

"A knife, a rope, and a lead pipe," he said. "Someone's got the life-size version of Clue."

"What are you talking about?" said the Santa.

"Right now, burglary in the first degree," said Edwards. "But in the spirit of the season, we might only charge you with burglary second. And if you're very helpful, we can drop it to an attempt."

"What are you doing?" whispered Doris.



make out where the super had patched the three bullet holes with toothpaste, which worked almost as well as the spackle job the building's owner would be billed for, but not as well as the new wall the owner would deduct from his taxes. She didn't want to go to sleep. Not the way things had been going. The gun was loaded and nestled on her lap. Such comforting things, guns. She had had three cups of coffee and was ready for anything.

A slight noise outside caught her attention. She put her knitting down but didn't pick up the gun. Not yet. A dark shape loomed at the far window, just as it had the two previous nights. The latch was still broken, and the well-oiled window opened easily. She waited until he was all the way in, then brought her hands together sharply.

The lights came on, and Santa threw an arm over his face, squinting in her direction. She picked up the gun.

"Yes, Santa, I have the Clapper," she said, and calmly fired six shots into his body. He reeled back under the impact, then fell against the wall. She examined her placement with satisfaction, then picked up the phone.

"Homer, it's me," she said. "Mr. Johnson came late, but he's now the late Mr. Johnson. I'll let you know about tomorrow. Right." She hung up, then called 911.

"I need the police," she said.

"Don't bother," said Santa, getting up. She screamed in terror and picked up the gun, pulling the trigger repeatedly. "That was six shots," he added, and he reached into his suit and brought out a .38. "You're under arrest, Mrs. Rettinger," said Detective Edwards, taking off the hat, wig, and beard. He opened the door, and Doris and eight uniforms came rushing in.

"You get the number?" asked Edwards, and she nodded. "Good. I got her end of it." He pulled a small tape recorder out from the suit. "I like being Santa," he commented. "You can carry so much stuff." He opened the coat to reveal a cast-iron shield strapped over his bulletproof vest.

"Mrs. Rettinger, you are being charged with two counts of murder in the second degree, one count of attempted murder in the second degree, and conspiracy in whatever degree it is. I'll have to check the book. But the good news is if you help us nail Homer Hynes, we can probably be creative with the plea-bargaining. Doris will take you down to the station so we can talk. And give her some more coffee, Doris. It's going to be a long night."

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"No more for me, thanks," said Mrs. Rettinger. "I've had plenty. What tipped you off?"

"I just realized that there was no reason to kill you, but there was enough reason to bump off every one of those crumbs. And that would have been a message for all the other crumbs out there not to make the same mistake. Now, gentlemen and ladies, until we strike a deal with Mrs. Rettinger, none of this goes to the press. We don't want Mr. Hynes to figure out the game's up just yet. After all, does Macy's tell Gimbel's?"

"What's Gimbel's?" asked a rookie, and all the veteran cops in the room felt indescribably old and sad.

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# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Hopscotch, anyone? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

# The William Wordsworth Murder

Michelle Knowlden



**“A**nd who is buried in Robin Hood’s grave?” Aunt Helena’s compelling voice filled the noisy pub and silenced conversations in a twenty meter circumference around us.

“Robin Hood?” I hazarded, and lifted a half pint of beer. Medicinal, of course. My heart was slowly failing me. I had taken ill the moment my cousin Robyn conceived this insane scheme of hers. A coast-to-coast walk across England. Unfortunately, Aunt Helena had leapt upon the idea like a reporter on a corpse. She had some notion that the daffodils and lazy clouds of the Lake District would inspire the poetic ligaments of her secretary, Gregory, one of Wisconsin’s foremost unpublished poets.

She also believed Britain to be a regular kettle of murderous happenings. As executor of my uncle’s trust, she felt it her duty to keep me honest to the clause that I must be gainfully employed to receive my monthly funds. Since I was a detective, then I too must be embroiled in this mad hike. If an impending coronary didn’t kill me, then a fall off Cringle Moor surely would.

“Nonsense,” said Aunt Helena. “Robin Hood is a myth.”

“Is he?” I murmured. Gregory eyed me, and I was off. He be-

lieved everything I said, which brought out the worst in me. “Bill Bonestalker, arch historian of the third elk of Keld, wrote extensively about him in the thirteenth century. I believe there’s a museum in Reeth that has Robin Hood’s green leggings. The very leggings he wore when rescuing Maid Marian from the evil sheriff.”

“Which evil sheriff?” asked Robyn, sitting down at our table. She had been discussing the vagaries of pound coins and shillings with the proprietor.

“Nottingham,” I said, and took another sip of ale. Ghastly stuff, but an excellent blood thickener.

“Ah.” Robyn sketched a glance at Gregory. “You must be talking about Robin Hood. Looking forward to seeing his grave, Greg? Did you know that Wordsworth laid a curse on that pile of rocks? That if any true poet, only a *true* poet mind you, passes within a hundred feet of the site, he’ll be struck with verse deafness till he dies.”

“No,” I breathed.

“That’s right.” Robyn nodded briskly. “He’ll be rendered incapable of rhyme or meter, sense or synchronicity the rest of his natural days.”

Gregory followed our digression with wide eyes and a horrified look. It really was too easy.

My heart skipped a beat, then

settled. I clutched the table and took a few rapid breaths. Robyn and Aunt Helena ignored me. Several years ago, I had suffered through, and eventually recovered from, arrhythmia and arteriosclerosis. Little attention they paid then, and even less now. I had anticipated this coronary for months now, and still reeled from the effects of that first attack on the plane. The flight attendants had been fully supportive, even moving me to first class, and had listened patiently while I described my symptoms and showed them the charts I'd highlighted in *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia*. The pilot had patted my hand and discussed the other disorders and diseases inflicted on me these past four years. Inflicted alphabetically, of course.

I eased myself carefully out of my chair and limped over to the bar. Time to call our pack service for the morrow. I didn't see a phone immediately but from my previous six nights' experience knew that one should be nearby.

Because I seemed to be the only one who understood the oddities of the British telephone exchange or was the only one with the right coins at the end of the day, the others designated me to call the shuttle van to pick up our packs for each morrow. Trekking these treacher-

ous hills with a light daypack was bad enough, but to haul around a sixty pound pack while inching down a steep path was unthinkable.

I tried to hail the bartender, who only gave me a sullen nod before turning back to his cronies. Listlessly I looked around the circular varnished counter, then shut my eyes. When I had lost my sight recently due to a degenerative affliction of the cornea, I'd discovered the extraordinary power of hearing. I sifted through the thumps and growls of tavern talk for the shrill, one-sided voice of telephone chatter.

"Yes. Yes. Soon now. Tell her it'll be over soon."

That's it, I thought. I swiveled my head around, trying to locate the voice.

"Make her understand, then. He'll pay for her pain. I'll make sure of that."

There was a sudden clatter of the phone's being hung up. I winced. I'd been listening too hard. Pushing away from the bar and slowly circling the counter, I found the telephone in a small alcove to the side of the bar. No one stood nearby, but the receiver still felt warm. I made the call and returned to the table.

Aunt Helena had spread out the ordinance map and coast-to-coast guide. This proved to be a

nightly ritual of ours, and of no redeeming value. Each day we wandered into some bog or circled a tarn a dozen times till Robyn, a former Girl Scout, got the hang of the various gyros and scopes that hung about her neck. It seems England is a few magnetic degrees different from the wilds of Wisconsin, and that had us stalking off in directions unmapped by British ramblers.

"Oh, look," said Robyn unenthusiastically. "Another tarn tomorrow."

"A tarn is a glacial pond high in the fells," intoned Aunt Helena. She flipped to the guide dictionary. "A fell is a hill."

I sighed. The Himalayas had nothing on an English hill. Six days into this suicide march and I was blistered and bruised from sole to crown. Tramping these hills was not for those who shrank from heights or rugged paths. Most of the tracks were little wider than our boots, and the altitude would make an egret blanch.

"Are we ready for our trek tomorrow?" a bright voice sang through the pub.

In unison we all groaned. Other coast-to-coast walkers in the pub hurriedly hid behind their shepherd's pie or warm beer. Aunt Helena waved her over.

"Ophelia dear, do join us."

As she came over, I smothered

another groan. Every night she had reviewed her "alternate routes" for us and the other walkers. Paths that took us past the too few flatlands or wide valleys, over the harrowing heights of High Stile Range and infamous Helvellyn. We were nearing the halfway point, and every walker wished her ill. Very ill indeed. Except for Aunt Helena, who had probably been as endearing in her youth.

"Sit next to me, Ophelia," said Aunt Helena. "Tell us all about your day's adventures."

"It's Olivia, Mrs. Cardex," she said sweetly. "And I had a lovely go of it today." Gregory gave her a sensitive, soulful look. He had the notion that women swooned over looks like that, but outside of the drab coffeehouses he sometimes frequented, he hadn't caught one yet. Olivia looked quite unhooked herself, more concerned with walks than poets.

"I took the alternate path along Striding Edge, and how glorious the views were," she said brightly. "None of our little group accompanied me, although I gave you all a chance last night, didn't I? Never mind that. But oh, the views! I can't describe how terrific they were."

"Oh, do try," Robyn said dryly. "We're all agog to hear."

"I took pictures," she said, scrabbling in her pack. "If you'll

give me your addresses in the States, I'll be happy to send you copies."

I obligingly passed her our agency's card. Robyn gave me a dark look.

Aunt Helena turned the ordinance map around. "Tell us which way you'd recommend into Kerrick tomorrow. One that will take us to the haunted woods, that charming Druid circle of stones, and our first sight of the moors."

"And don't forget Robin Hood's grave," I added.

"I'm glad you asked," she said earnestly. "I have an alternate route." She turned to a few other weary coast-to-coast hikers at the tables near us. "You'll not only get to see a moor but traverse it, too." She clasped her hands in rapture.

"Robin Hood's grave," I said firmly. "And then straight into Kerrick."

"Nonsense," Aunt Helena said in her penetrating voice. "Michaela, you are too morbid with your desire for graves. We must see the haunted woods and that circle where they made human sacrifices. And not forget all those lovely Roman burial mounds. What do you call them, Ophelia?"

"It's Olivia," she said. "Tumuli. You wouldn't miss them on my route."

"Thank you, I'm sure," Robyn

said. She tapped the guidebook. "But we'll be going the regular way. Best to do it right or not at all. I doubt we could take credit for the hundred and eighty-two miles if we were zagging when we should have been zigging."

"Oh well," Olivia said, bouncing up from her seat. "I'm sure someone will accompany me." I wagered no one but her friend Rachel would go off with her. The walk itself was rigorous enough without adding more uphill climbs or boggy marshes.

The next morning I staggered out of my bed at Mrs. Mellington's bed-and-breakfast, stiff-legged and sore. To keep up appearances, I tried to walk naturally into the breakfast room. After all, half the walkers were twenty or more years older than I. Then I remembered I had an impending coronary thrombosis. I sagged over my muesli and orange juice.

By the time the others joined me, I had finished the cereal course, a regimen of B-complex and antioxidant vitamins, and was waiting for the usual plate of eggs, bacon, and grilled tomato with a rack of thin toast. Except for Helena, everyone in our group seemed to be suffering from the typical "six days into the course and wondering what you'd gotten yourself into" malady. Even the tireless Robyn moved slowly to the sideboard

with tea, juice, and cereal boxes, then seemed defeated by the multitude of choices.

"Ere ye go, dearie." Mrs. Mellington slid the plate of food in front of me. "Same for the rest of you?"

"I think not," sniffed Helena. "If you please, only raw tomato and unbuttered toast."

Mrs. Mellington nodded efficiently and sailed back to the kitchen. Robyn and Gregory looked at my breakfast and sighed. The other walkers, sitting at small tables around us, ate their thick bacon slices and heaping portions of scrambled eggs heartily. Most were red-cheeked and lean, almost luminous with health. Aunt Helena stared at my plate with loathing.

"That bacon fat will kill you, Michaela. Send it back immediately."

"Already dying," I mumbled. I sliced off another bit of bacon.

Robyn suddenly slumped in her seat and groaned. "Don't look now. The Duke and Duchess of Walking have arrived."

I looked up to see the couple enter the room and take the last table near the door. Peter Allyn and his wife Alice. Alice Allyn dripped with gold chains and raw silk. Nothing of the hardened rambler about her. Mr. Allyn was dressed in a sleek wind suit. He could have modeled for

an advertisement of what seasoned men wear for a tough day on the Pennine peaks.

When his wife wasn't looking, Peter Allyn winked boldly at Robyn. Robyn turned an angry pink. "Puke," she growled. "Who does he think he is?"

"Lady-killer," said a voice behind us. A sharp yip echoed her.

We turned and saw Constance Harwell holding her tiny Yorkshire terrier, Brahms. A woman near Aunt's age and with mutual interests, they'd become fast friends. Both had a recent attachment to health foods, both overflowed with energy, and both had an inordinate regard for other people's business.

"Lady-killer?" asked Robyn, puzzled.

"Yes, dear," said Constance. "A saying from my generation. A man who enjoys a certain power over woman. A man who could destroy her reputation."

Brahms continued to yip while Constance talked. He was a marvelous mimic.

"Her reputation. Right." Robyn grinned. Brahms jumped into her lap and began to mess with her compass and charts. Locating her guidebook, he growled at it and began to gnaw the edges.

"Don't smirk at me, young lady," Constance admonished Robyn. "I realize you young peo-



ple today don't care a fig for your reputations, but in my time it meant everything."

"Dashed right, it did," said Helena. *Dashed?* I wondered.

"Things return to where they should be," said Constance. "A reputation based on purity, faithfulness, and honor cannot be shifted. Oh!"

Peter Allyn, passing behind her, had given her ample rump a tweak. Brahms barked at him and wagged his tail vigorously. Constance turned a furious red.

"Someone should teach you a lesson," she cried after him. He waved his walking stick at her impudently. Alice followed him, shrugging at the fuming Constance as they left the room.

"Where's Olivia?" I asked, more to dilute Constance's and Helena's rage than from any interest in the alternate path-maker.

"Ah," said Helena, "the dear girl left at dawn. What a hard worker she is. Such an accomplished child. Her people must be so proud."

"Indeed," said Constance, appeased at the thought of so much virtue. Then, with twin looks of disapproval, both watched me finish off the bacon.

We left the b-and-b just as the Burkes' van drove off with our backpacks. It also carried Olivia's friend Rachel and Alice Allyn. I wasn't surprised to see

Mrs. Allyn riding this leg of the walk. She'd been too well-dressed this morning for fell-walking in the rain and had taken the van most days in any case. Rachel was another matter, but I suspected yesterday's walk with Olivia had been one alternate route too many. She drooped against the window. Enviously, I watched them leave.

Constance and Aunt Helena set their walking sticks into the gravel and headed off to find the first marker of the day. Robyn glanced at her compass and stuffed the map in her rucksack. Gregory patted his own pack absently. As long as it contained his lunch and various snacks for teatime, he walked with contentment.

I rubbed my chest. My heart rattled in a downward spiral to prolonged heart failure.

*This was the crisis of that  
strong disease,  
This the soul's last and lowest  
ebb; I drooped . . .*

At my feet, Brahms rolled over and played dead.

"Poor woman that Alice Allyn," said Constance. "Men are fickle beasts, and she married the most faithless of the lot."

Aunt Helena shrugged. "His manners are atrocious, but how

do you know he's not just a swaggering bore?"

"Because he's meeting a woman today on a bridge. I saw the note myself."

"You saw a note?" Aunt Helena's eyes squinted with envy.

"Yes, I saw him looking at it in the pub last night. He left it in his jacket. When he was at the bar, I accidentally jostled it when passing. I just happened to see what it said while putting it back in his pocket. He's meeting someone named Lucy Gray."

"As shall we all," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The child ghost that walks the hills and moors. In the wild, many have seen her." At their astonished looks, I said, "It's a poem by Wordsworth. On a snowy day, Lucy Gray's father sent her to carry a lantern to her mother. The child never arrived in the village. They found her small footprints trailing through the hills and fields till they finally ended on an icy bridge."

"How sad," Robyn said.

"Perhaps. Whole poem might have been a pure figment of old Bill's."

"A real ghost," breathed Aunt Helena. Gregory eyed her nervously.

"Yes, there's that, too," I said briskly. "And Wordsworth said you can still hear her singing a

'solitary song/That whistles in the wind.'"

Gregory gulped.

Since leaving William Wordsworth's Dove Cottage, a bit of his verse had echoed in my thoughts.

*One impulse from a vernal  
wood*

*May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.*

I felt more akin to the emotions and wildness of men on this raw track we followed than I'd ever felt in the streets of Wisconsin. There, sickness lingered in warm rooms redolent with thick soups and humidifiers. Here, death pressed close on craggy fells.

Robyn led our small troop single file through the narrow parts and en masse through the wider passages. Gregory followed her. I brought up the rear just behind Constance. Brahms rode most of the walk in Constance's rucksack. Throughout the day, he would pop his head out of the pack and favor me with a tongue-lolling, canine grin.

Whenever the way allowed, Constance and Helena would walk shoulder to shoulder, and gossip about our past landlords or fellow walkers. The Allyns

got regular coverage, but Rachel received her share of it, too. Compared to the effervescent Olivia, she seemed drab and limp. Helena was positive Rachel harbored a dark past, and Constance thought her a well of secret vice. I admired Olivia's friend her fortitude and splend did pallor.

Even our backpack driver got his time in the pillory. John Burke was a simple, leathery man with a round, red face. He rolled his own cigarettes and spoke little. His wife was the dynamo in the relationship. The call to arrange the next day's drop was always a terrific wrangle. The morrow's fee rose and fell depending on the irritations that had nagged her that day. Waving the payment schedule about or insisting upon the prior arrangement did little good. Constance waxed certain that Burke had done something despicable in an earlier life to be burdened with such a shrew now.

We passed by the old Roman mounds, or tumuli, memorials to dead soldiers and ancient campaigns. Throughout our walk, we'd become accustomed to the piles of rocks, or cairns, that told us we were on the right path. Following tradition, we added a handful of stones ourselves. But we steered away from the Roman mounds and

let wind and time flatten the hills. Although we each had a turn photographing Aunt Helena beside every one we encountered, the rest of us treated these old monuments with wary respect. Gregory gave them a wide berth as if he was sure that old soldiers disliked poets as much as dead bandits.

We had a time of it keeping Aunt Helena from trotting down the road to the haunted village. It did look eerie with its dark, overhanging trees. An uncanny quiet settled over the roadway into it, and not a dog or child could be seen at its portal. Constance finally dissuaded her from assailing the unfriendly ramparts by murmuring about spirits who'd brook no trespass today. A light rain began to fall—the final discouraging comment. With a gusty sigh, Aunt Helena turned away.

In deference to Aunt Helena's and Constance's advanced years and my thrombosis, we took frequent tea breaks. In the high glens, sitting on a flat rock, drinking hot tea from a thermos, nibbling on shortbread or fruitcake, and gazing down at the clefted caverns or moors or narrow winding track, I could easily forget the horrors of this hike and revel in the miles we'd covered. Our lunch stop was high above Black Dub, where King Charles had stooped to

drink from the river. Refreshed, he and his troops turned away from their battles and went home. In the distance I could see a lone walker trailing out of the bend where Robin Hood's grave lay and wending down the golden valley. I wondered idly if it was anyone we knew.

Showing poor judgment, Robyn lent her maps to Aunt Helena while we ate our thick cheese sandwiches slathered with sweet red relish. She immediately found a dozen bridges, none on the right path, and demanded we visit them all. I knew she was still thinking of Lucy Gray and the small footprints in the snow. I pointed out that it was September, but she was adamant.

"But, Aunt," said Robyn, "Robin Hood's grave is close by. You'd spy it from here, if not for that crook in the path and the hillside. It's a must see."

"Robin Hood is a myth," Helena said coldly. "I prefer real ghosts."

"Then why not wait here while Robyn and I check it out," I offered. "We shouldn't be long."

That wouldn't do either. Helena's nose fairly quivered at the idea of missing something. While we repacked our rucksacks, the rain drizzled to a stop and the sun came out feebly. Brahms poked his nose out and barked encouragingly.

We drifted down a gentle incline on a wide path banked by two straw-covered hills. Large boulders and piles of shale careened down the sides and marred the walkway. "Just around the corner," Robyn would call out firmly whenever Gregory or I faltered. We traversed four of those corners before finding the large hump of stones against the base of a small hill.

"Are you sure this is it?" I asked. We stared dubiously at the unmarked grave.

"Got to be," Robyn said, consulting the guidebook. "It's right where it should be."

I forbore mentioning that she'd announced its location at several other turnings before now.

"We should have looked for bridges instead," Constance said with a sniff. Aunt Helena agreed with another sniff.

"Gregory, take my picture," I said, unhooking the daypack, the water belt, and the pouch that held my pills. I arranged myself near the mound and smiled at the camera. Constance and Helena disencumbered themselves of their own packs. Constance pulled out her tea thermos and released Brahms.

Robyn scowled over her maps and muttered, "We could go back the way we came, or we could

continue on this way, or back a hundred meters to the south and over . . . " Gregory tipped out the fruitcakes and crisps left from lunch and gazed sorrowfully at his muddied hiking boots. I stayed where I'd landed, next to Robin Hood's grave, and thought about deaths both slow and quick.

Brahms trotted around the grave, ardent at the thought of old bones. While Constance and Helena debated the merits of bridges around Kerrick, he snuffled and scratched at the rock-strewn site. Soon his digging was interrupted with excited yelps. My hand clutched at my shirt while Constance checked on Brahms. Soon, I thought. Soon I'll be as dead as ancient legends. Suddenly Constance screamed, and my heart stopped cold.

"Murder," she screamed. "Brahms found him. Murder!"

My heart lurched again, and I gulped air. Robin Hood, I thought hazily. Brahms found Robin Hood?

Helena and Robyn rushed around the grave to Constance's side. Gregory stood up reluctantly. Slowly I raised myself and staggered to where they huddled anxiously, Constance clutching Brahms to her bosom. A gray hand, a man's hand, poked through the stones.

I knelt down next to it and

started pulling off the rocks. After a moment Robyn joined me. Helena began blustering about evidence and disturbing the scene of the crime, but we ignored her as well as Gregory's faint moans. The hand seemed cold and unmoving, but I had to release him just in case he still lived. When enough rocks had been thrown off, Robyn and Gregory dragged the body to level ground.

I had never seen a corpse outside a funeral parlor. Except maybe in the Rostanovich case, but those were only old bones. I hunkered down next to it.

The clothing was crusted with dirt and dented with the heavy marks rocks leave. He wore walker's clothes and heavy raingear. There was a deep gash behind his left ear, and the blood had congealed to a dark brown through his silver hair. His features could still be discerned through a smear of mud. It was Peter Allyn.

I sat back on my heels and wondered that the coronary thrombosis didn't just peel me from the damp earth at that moment. Carefully I stood and stumbled weakly towards my vitamin pouch. I washed down a handful with some tepid water while Robyn gazed blankly at the dead man. It was a curious tableau surrounding the fallen ladies' man. Constance

stood behind Robyn, one hand pressed to her mouth and the other squeezing Brahms tightly. Gregory stood beside her, his hand at her elbow. I wasn't sure who supported whom. Aunt Helena looked at me with outrage, but it was a look I was so familiar with that I didn't respond.

While waiting for the pills to calm my hammering heart, I looked around the area. The surrounding hills almost hid the gravesite from view. We'd taken the only path that passed it. One could climb over the hills; none of them equaled the great mountains we'd struggled across in the Lake District. Nettles did make one hill difficult, though, and a heavy undergrowth of heather impeded walkers and murderers on the side of the other.

I circled the grave carefully but found nothing that would pass for evidence. The rain had obscured all footprints but our own. No rocks within a twenty foot radius were stained with Allyn's blood, and no other weapon reared into sight.

I crouched next to the victim and went through his pockets.

"I say," began Constance in faint indignation.

"You there, Michaela," said Aunt Helena with more than faint wrath. "Stop that at once. Have you no respect?"

"He's dead, Aunt," I said

shortly. "Getting his murderer is the most respectful thing I can do for him now."

She leaned eagerly over me. "Are you on the case, then?"

I grunted and slipped my hand into his vest pocket. Aunt Helena swooped up and made a grand gesture to the others. "You heard her, we're on the case. Gregory, go back the way we came, and send someone to retrieve the police from Kerrick. Robyn, climb that hill there and see if you see anyone. Constance, pour out tea for us all."

She unfolded the map as the others dashed to do her bidding. I stopped and took my pulse. Reassured by the result, I finished emptying his pockets and studied the meager results. The pack service probably ferried most of his belongings along with his wife. If he carried a daypack as most other walkers did, it had been removed. He didn't have even a water bottle now. What he did have was the inevitable guidebook (although his was less used than most), a few coins, an ordinance map, and a creased note. I gingerly unfolded it.

"What is it?" Helena breathed down my neck. I suppressed a yelp.

"Probably the note Constance saw last night." I felt cold grue down my spine when I saw the *Lucy Gray* signature. "It says to

meet her near Oddenthwaite, your haunted wood, Aunt. They must have continued their walk to here." I trailed off, remembering the lone figure I'd seen walking away from the path to the grave. Had it been a man or woman, tall or short? From that distance I couldn't be sure.

"What time did we break for tea?" I asked.

Aunt Helena, as good with time as she was with snooping, said readily, "We stopped at twelve past twelve, and continued on the path at twelve forty-four. Why?"

"I'm not sure," I said slowly. "But I may have seen the murderer leave the scene then."

**G**regory and Robyn finished off the food while we waited three tedious hours for the Kerrick police. Robyn ate one-handed and took careful notes of the day's events with the other. Constance and Aunt Helena drank the rest of the tea and discussed possible suspects. I found a sunny, dry spot on the side of the hill and dozed fitfully.

The sun was beginning to set as two policemen hove into sight on the path. We had covered the dead man with Brahms's blanket, and both immediately headed for the corpse. Aunt Helena intercept-

ed them to begin to harangue them about their tardiness and her suppositions. They set her aside with a smooth professionalism that I envied and uncovered the corpse. With some head shaking and murmured invective, they probed Allyn. They used flashlights to sweep the area and took samples of grass and dirt around the grave. During this initial investigation, only once did they speak to us directly, and that was to ask if a food wrapper was one of ours. Robyn agreed it was and stuffed it in her pack with a red face.

While one took pictures, the other policeman finally approached us. He introduced himself as Adrian Stemple and licked his pencil while surveying the five of us thoughtfully. He paid no attention to Brahms, who yipped and growled at his feet. He studiously ignored the furious cries emerging from Constance and Aunt Helena, and leveled a questioning look at me. I gave him a brief but precise account of the body's discovery. Robyn pressed her notes on him. He stuffed his notebook into a shirt pocket and snapped shut the small evidence case.

"Gather up your things and follow me," he said and headed down the path. On the way back we collected the other po-



liceman, a younger man than our interrogator.

"But we can't leave poor Mr. Allyn there," protested Constance.

"He's not going anywhere," said Stemple. "Don't worry yourself. I'll be sending a policeman back to watch the body till morning. Then we'll helicopter him out."

Fortunately, we did not have to walk to Kerrick in the dark. Stemple led us back to the highway, where we were met by several police cars. His subordinate, a Stanley White, stashed Robyn and me in one car and the others in a second. We watched Stemple direct a waiting policeman back to Robin Hood's grave; then White and Stemple drove us to the Gavelon bed-and-breakfast in Kerrick, twenty minutes away. They'd saved us almost three hours' walking time, a fact that fretted Robyn, who wondered aloud if we should return and do the route on foot tomorrow. I gave her a withering look.

I remembered little about meeting the Gavelons that evening. I left them soon after arriving and went to bed. I didn't stop to see if the pack had made it there or not. If Burke had abandoned it on High Gillerthwaite, I wouldn't have wept. I heard Aunt Helena accepting tea and biscuits, and regaling

the poor man and woman with details about the murder scene. I fell asleep and dreamt of battered corpses and flat-line electrocardiograms.

I smelled coffee when I woke. After a quick shower, I went down to the breakfast room with mixed emotions. One was joy that we could hardly be expected to continue our walk if we had to answer questions today. And sorrow for the death of a fellow walker. Never mind the fact that he was not an exemplary being. We'd shared the sea air of Saint Bee's Head and scrambled over the same boulders on Honister Crag. Few friendships are forged in stronger fires.

I poured myself some stout English tea (English coffee smells good but is undrinkable) and plowed into a bowl of Weetabix. I studiously ignored Rachel and Olivia eating at a table across from mine. Rachel looked rested from her day off, an appearance I planned cultivating tomorrow. Robyn joined me a few moments later with maps clutched in her hand and a wrinkle furrowing her brow.

"Might as well put those away," I said. "We're not going anywhere." I swallowed a spoonful of cereal. "The police won't let us leave till their investigation is complete." Unsuccessful-

ly, I tried to keep the smug tone out of my voice. Robyn's eyes narrowed on me.

"Don't tell me you're investigating this murder. I thought you were just fobbing off Aunt Helena yesterday with your 'on the case' business."

"I was. This is a police investigation. We've no clients, no case. The thing is, we're the ones who discovered the body. We'll support the police in whatever way we can, even if we have to stay at this lovely bed-and-breakfast till our flight next week."

"I can't believe you'd give up our hike so easily. You've got all the murder you could want in the States."

"And I can't believe you dragged me on this hellish walk when you knew I was about to have a coronary."

"You're very hard to gauge," she said sourly. "I thought you'd be up to dandruff by now."

Constance fluttered into the room with Constable Stemple behind her. I noticed Olivia and Rachel watching them with surprise.

Stemple looked around the room with that assessing stare of his. "I'll need statements from anyone who had contact with Mr. Allyn yesterday." He looked at Olivia and Rachel. "I understand you knew him?"

"Knew him?" Rachel said

blankly. "Has something happened?"

"He was murdered yesterday, and left on the C to C path," Aunt Helena said with relish. She and Gregory entered the room as she spoke. Stemple gave her a telling look.

"Murdered?" Rachel shrieked. "You say murdered? But I was in the Burkes' van with Mrs. Allyn yesterday. Does she know?"

"I informed her last night. She's staying at a hotel here in town." Stemple pulled out his notebook and looked at Rachel. "I take it then that you are Rachel Roberts? If you'll come with me, I have a few questions."

Aunt Helena scowled. "Why not question her here, constable? Then you'll have the benefit of our expert advice."

"Expert advice?"

"Hmph," said Helena. "You don't recognize my niece, Michaela Cardex? She's one of America's foremost murder investigators."

"This one?" said Stemple incredulously, pointing at me. "The one Mrs. Gavelon calls a hypochondriac?"

"I have a coronary thrombosis," I said coldly.

"Micky Cardex is well known for her deductive capabilities, sir," Robyn said tactfully. "If there's any assistance she or any of us at the agency can provide, please ask."

"I don't believe that will be necessary," Stemple said. "We employ our own team of experts, and they enjoy reliable health."

Bully for them, I thought. Helena fumed as Stemple left the room with Rachel in tow.

Olivia joined us at our table, a cup of tea warming her trembling hands. "What happened?" she asked. "Was Peter Allyn really murdered?"

"Yes, he was," said Robyn absently.

"Which way did you go yesterday?" I asked. "Did you see anyone in our group on your trek, or anything that might be at all suspicious?"

"No," she said. "But then I wasn't in the right place for seeing anything. I took the northern route. It's miles farther, but you see more antiquities that way. I told you that yesterday, didn't I."

"So you did," I said.

"Brahms found him," Constance offered proudly. "Sniffed him out like a bloodhound, he did."

"Did that Rachel say anything to you?" Aunt Helena demanded.

"No." Olivia shook her head. "About what? She was in bed when I arrived last night."

"About what she did yesterday. She should have arrived here midmorning. What did she

do with the entire day?" Aunt Helena's eyes narrowed suggestively. "Did she, for example, walk back along the path to Robin Hood's grave?"

"Did she what?" Olivia asked, bewildered.

"I think it was that Mrs. Allyn," Constance put in. "The woman wronged, you might say."

"Mrs. Allyn?" Olivia protested. "No, it couldn't be her."

"And why not?" Constance was irritated that her theory was so quickly dismissed. "It is generally the wife who's the first suspect. And that Alice Allyn has seen a thing or two. And done them, I'll be bound."

"Oh, Alice Allyn. Perhaps you're right. The world's a bit worse than you imagine, don't you think?" Olivia said naively.

"I say it's Rachel," Aunt Helena said. "That girl looks too wishy-washy for my taste. I think it masks a coldhearted killer."

"Rachel?" Olivia looked shocked. "I shouldn't think so. I've known her for years. She couldn't hurt a fly."

"You're too young to understand the workings of a truly evil mind. I have studied it and in my dealings with ruthless killers know it well. But none of them was a match for me, Ophelia. Trust me on that."

Aunt Helena nodded complacently.

"It's Olivia, Mrs. Cardex," she said.

I only half listened to the discussion about Rachel's wicked ways. Between thinking that breakfast would probably be no more than cereal today and pondering the distasteful fact that I would have to solve this murder, I had been concentrating on the latter. If the police could not even recognize the seriousness of my heart condition, how could they identify a murderer? I would have to bring the killer to justice myself.

"Do you know a Lucy Gray?" I asked Olivia.

Her eyelids flickered. "I don't think so," she said hesitantly. "Should I?"

Rachel returned just then, tailed closely by Stemple. He pointed to Olivia, who stood up and followed him meekly out of the room. Gone was the cheery taker of alternate paths. Rachel, on the other hand, seemed much stimulated by her role as murder suspect.

Helena questioned her sharply. "So what did he ask you? And how did you answer?"

She demurely poured herself a cup of tea before answering, clearly enjoying being the center of attention. Gregory passed her the creamer. "He asked me, about my whereabouts yester-

day. I told him that I took the Burkes' van at about eight thirty and arrived here about ten. And that I had lunch at the pub The Pheasant and the Hearth. Then I took a nap. Afterwards I had dinner at the same pub. And then I sat and visited with the Gavelons till I went to bed. At eight." At our looks, she said defensively, "Well, I was tired."

"Was that it?" Helena asked impatiently.

"He also asked about Mrs. Allyn. What she did yesterday after Mr. Burke dropped us off here."

"And you said?" Robyn prompted.

"That I didn't know. She walked over to the hotel, and I didn't see her all day."

"I knew it would be the wife," Constance said triumphantly.

"What does Mrs. Allyn have to do with Lucy Gray?" I asked. No one was listening.

"I did not think it was you, Rachel dear," said Aunt Helena. "Not seriously, anyway."

"Well, thank you." Rachel looked confused.

"She doesn't have the spark," Aunt Helena said in a low voice to Constance. "I do, think you're right, dear. It must be Mrs. Allyn. It shows in that brassy way she dresses."

"Dresses?" I said. But no one heard me.

Robyn sighed with relief.

"Well, maybe we can salvage a day of walking out of this. I'll check the maps. Gregory, see if you can rustle us up some toast."

Without saying a word, I left the breakfast room and walked out of the house. At the street, I headed for the village center. I passed the pub where Rachel had spent part of yesterday and located The George Hotel just behind it. I didn't doubt it was the hotel that entertained Mrs. Allyn; Kerrick had but one.

Alice Allyn was bravely facing this first day as a widow with a gin and tonic in the hotel foyer. She wore black velvet with spangles down the front of her bodice and a belt tightly cinched at the waist.

"Mrs. Allyn? May I speak with you?" I asked gently.

She looked up and frowned. "Are you the press?"

"No. A coast-to-coast walker. My name is Micky Cardex."

She squinted at me. "Are you sure you're not the press? I've made up a statement for you if you are."

"No, Mrs. Allyn. I was there when your husband's body was found."

"Oh," she said, and put a dainty hand to her mouth. "Oh dear." She began to weep quietly into a linen handkerchief.

"I know you've been annoyed with impertinent questions, but

I wonder if you would bear a few more from me?"

"To be sure, dear, I'd appreciate the company. Since the police left last night, there's been no one here to talk to."

"Were you able to assist the police?"

"Oh my, no. I hadn't seen Peter since early yesterday morning. I had a dreadful headache and stayed here in my room the entire day. I believe the police would like to blame me for the murder, but I had a drink brought up near lunchtime. They tell me that's when Peter was . . ." Her voice trailed off.

I patted her hand. "I never thought you did it, Mrs. Allyn. My aunt is never right." I shook my head slightly at her look of confusion. "Is there anyone I can call for you? Perhaps a relative to be with you through this ordeal?"

"I called my sister, but it will be ages before she can get here. And the police want me to see his body in an hour. To verify his identity, they say. I expect it will be gruesome. You've seen him, dear—was it so very horrible?"

"I expect you'll find the strength to bear it. We all have the mettle within that carries us through difficult times, whether it be chronic illness or the death of a loved one."

"Chronic illness?" She dabbed at her eyes.

"I'm sure you'll be all right. May I ask those questions now?"

"Yes, dear. I'm ready." She resolutely put away her handkerchief and smiled tremulously at me.

"Do you know a Lucy Gray?"

"No," she said. A small frown appeared between her eyes. "Unless she's Peter's hair stylist. No—I believe her name is Anne Gray."

"Did you ever hear of a young girl who died in a tragic way?"

"No," she said. I was hesitating, trying to think of a way to phrase the next question, when she added, "Unless you mean Peter's daughter."

"His daughter?"

"From his first marriage. Oh my, it was a long time ago. She did die tragically, though—drowned in a river. But her name wasn't Lucy."

"Do you know anything else about it?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Such a long time ago," she repeated. "And Peter does not figure well in the story." She opened her eyes and looked at me appealingly. "Must I repeat it?"

"It may help catch the killer."

"I don't see how," she sighed. "It wasn't even near here. Let me see. The girl's older sister, half-sister from the wife's previ-

ous marriage, usually watched Claire—yes, I think the child's name was Claire—while her mother worked in town. But this time the sister was away at school, so the first Mrs. Allyn left the child with Peter. Peter was a naughty boy back then, not the good man I've known. That particular day he had an assignation with Another Woman. He told Claire to go meet her mother on the path to town although it would be several hours before she returned from her job. There was a river along the walkway. He couldn't know the child would venture close to it and drown. It was a terrible accident. Peter rarely spoke of it."

"Those footmarks, one by one, / Into the middle of the plank; / And further there were none!"

"What is that, dear?" Alice Allyn cocked her head at me. I shook myself from my dismal reverie and did not explain the quote from Wordsworth's poem.

"Did you know the mother?" I asked, wondering if one of the walkers could be she. Constance would be the right generation, but the mind boggled imagining her in that role. Besides, wouldn't Allyn have recognized his ex-wife in whatever guise she wore?

"Oh no—I never met her. The accident had a terrible effect on

her, unhinged the poor woman. Peter divorced her after they committed her to one of those places for people with unsettled minds. Must be over ten years ago. Maybe fifteen. Peter and I have been married, were married, for almost nine years."

I made some hurried calculations in my mind. "Do you know how old Claire's sister would be now?"

"Her sister? I have no idea."

"Thank you, Mrs. Allyn. I won't disturb you further." I stood up, and pressed her hand gently. "I'm at the Gavelons' b-and-b if you need anything."

I walked slowly back to the bed-and-breakfast. The police car was still parked out in front. It could be Rachel, I thought. It could be Olivia. Both were the right age. Robyn and I were the right age also, but neither of us had philandering fathers or drowned sisters. There had been that note. Why had she not taken it after killing Allyn? Perhaps she hadn't believed anyone would associate it with Wordsworth's poem. Had she left it to put the blame on a Lucy Gray that no one would know? And still reserve a bit of justice for a dead child?

I hesitated, my hand on the front door. Even through the thick timbers, I could hear the chaos within, especially the

large tones of Aunt Helena. I needed quiet and time to think. I walked around to the back, and there a different drama was playing out. Standing near his van, John Burke laconically rolled a cigarette. A plump woman with graying hair brandished a backpack tag at Robyn and Constance.

"Mrs. Burke, I presume," I murmured as I brushed past her and headed for the back door.

"Of course," she said impatiently. "Now, who's to do something about this tag? It'll not be delivered marked like this."

"She did it," Constance shrieked. "She killed Peter Allyn."

"I say," John Burke protested mildly.

"She's the one." Constance flung open the door. "Inspector. Arrest this woman at once. She's the killer." She disappeared inside.

"I'm the what?" Mrs. Burke stared after her nonplussed. "Did that daft woman call me a killer?"

"She's wrong, you know," I assured her. "You're too old to be the killer."

Her face reddened with rage. "What's that?"

"Schedule," John Burke mumbled uneasily. He opened the driver's door. "Time to leave."

"I can explain," I said. "Lucy



Gray's sister, or more accurately Claire's half-sister, has to be more than twenty-five but less than thirty-five. We can have the police check the exact age. You're clearly older than thirty-five, older than forty-five, for that matter. Also, the killer would have to be fit enough to travel through these hills and dig a grave for a good-sized man. You're in no shape to do either, Mrs. Burke."

She didn't take my reassurances well. With invective that blistered the wall behind us, she heaved our packs out of the van and slammed the door shut. John Burke retired behind the wheel and drove out of the yard.

"That's torn it," Robyn said. She stared gloomily at the packs heaped on the gravel. "It's not enough that we missed Sunbiggin Tarn and the Long Barrows yesterday. Now we have to carry the heavy packs as well. We've Nine Standards and the Cleveland Hills to do yet, and I've heard that last stretch down Boggle Hole is tricky. Did you think of that before you told Mrs. Burke that she was old and fat?"

"I'm sure I didn't say that," I said. "I'm known for my diplomacy."

"I suppose I'll be the one to tell Aunt Helena? Fat chance I'll survive that. Just as well. I

doubt I'd make it up Clay Bank Top with a sixty pound pack."

"There's the spirit," I said. "Look on the bright side."

Constance peered out the door. "Have you heard?" she asked excitedly. "The Burkes killed poor Mr. Allyn. Something to do with a torrid affair. Alice with Mr. Burke or Peter with Mrs. Burke. One or the other. A jealous rage, I think we decided. Come hear the rest."

Slowly I followed Robyn and Constance back into the breakfast room. That the killer waited within, I didn't doubt. That justice should be served seemed the only possible action I could take. And yet a child's footprints on a riverbank haunted me as they surely haunted her sister. Had justice already been served on Robin Hood's grave?

Not heeding the arguments flying around him, Gregory ate fruitcake at the sidebar while balancing a cup of tea. The unflappable Stemple looked a trifle worn. Olivia sat next to Aunt Helena, absently snapping and unsnapping her rucksack. She seemed lost in thought, as if she were mapping out her next alternate path. Rachel watched Aunt Helena and Stemple bandy words. Her eyes glowed feverishly.

"Michaela, where have you been?" Helena demanded as I entered the room.

"The George Hotel, Aunt. Have you missed me?"

She glowered. "This impossible man has not heard a word I've said. We've all but handed the killer over to him, and he takes no action. You try to convince him."

"But I can't say that Mrs. Burke is the murderer."

"Why would we ask you to say that? Of course she's not the killer. Really, Michaela, you can be so obtuse."

I glanced over to see Stemple remove his glasses and rub his eyes wearily. Gregory cut another slice of fruitcake and fed a morsel to Brahms. I swallowed hard and felt a malaise creep over me. Was justice ever served by more death? My heart skipped a beat as I leaned against the door.

"Not Mrs. Burke? Then are we back to Mrs. Allyn?"

"That was an hour ago," Stemple said. "I believe it's Mr. Burke now."

"Of course it is." Aunt Helena shot him a disgusted look. "If you had any sense, you would know he did it. He had the means—his van. He had the motive—his wife was having an affair with Peter Allyn. Since he left here at ten yesterday morning, he had time to do it. And the note clinched the case. Mrs. Burke's name is Lois which is

similar to Lucy, and her hair is gray."

"Your hair is gray, too," I said. "And so is Constance's."

"My hair is silver," she said icily. "Don't confuse the police with your nonsense."

I turned to Stemple. "Would it be all right if I spoke with Rachel for a moment alone?"

"I suppose you think she did it?" I began to answer, but he shook his head. "Yes, never mind the fact that she was in and out of the pub all day. And miles away from the murder scene with no transport. Are all ye Cardexes mad then?"

"Of course not," Robyn snapped. "Aunt Helena's only a Cardex by marriage, and Micky's eccentric, not crazy."

"Thanks," I said. "Just for a moment, constable?"

"Interrogate the whole lot if you've a mind to. I need to call my superior anyway." As he walked towards the door, I said, "I assume you've checked all the alibis?" He stopped for a moment, then continued out of the room without turning around.

Olivia watched us leave with a frown. I led a nervous Rachel to her room and closed the door. We could still hear the others protesting and Brahms barking, but at least the noise was muted.

I moved a rucksack off a chair and sat down. Rachel perched

on the edge of an unmade bed and gave me a questioning look. I hesitated for a moment, trying to marshal my thoughts.

"Do you think I did it, then?" she asked.

I gazed at her, startled. "Why would I think that?"

"You asked Mr. Stemple about the alibis. I thought you meant mine. And you wanted to talk to me. To get me to confess, I thought."

"I know who did it," I said. "But I'm not expecting anyone to confess. I'm also not expecting to find any proof that will convince the police. But maybe you can help me settle something in my own mind. To help clarify a suspicion I have."

She nodded warily.

"Why have you come on this walk? Rambling doesn't really seem to be your thing."

"It isn't really, I suppose. It was Olivia's idea. She saw something about it on the television and said we should do it. She's a great walker and very clever about charting the courses."

"You and Olivia have been friends for a long time?"

"Ever so long. We knew each other at school, and she'd come home holidays with me. We finished school ages ago, but we still spend part of our holidays together."

"What about her family? You ever meet them?"

She frowned. "No. She didn't have much in the way of family. Her father died when she was a baby, and her mother was sick or something. She doesn't talk a lot about them."

"Did she have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. She was an only child. I think that's why she liked to visit my house—we had scads of kids there. I'm sure she longed for a family and siblings of her own. Sometimes she'd look at my little brothers or my baby sister and get tears in her eyes."

"Do you know what's wrong with her mother?"

"She's pretty closemouthed about it. I heard Mum tell Dad once that Olivia's mum had a nervous breakdown. But I think it may be worse than that. She's called her mother almost every day of our walk, and once I heard her say something about chemotherapy."

I suddenly remembered that strange phone call I heard in the pub two nights ago. "*Make her understand, then. He'll pay for her pain. I'll make sure of that.*" Had that been Olivia sending a message to her ailing mother? Was this her way of giving her mother some peace before she died?

"I have a bit of a headache,"

Rachel said. "Do you mind if I take a tablet?"

I shook my head absently, and she fetched her rucksack from under her bed. While she rummaged through it for an aspirin, I wondered how we could accuse Olivia, given what we knew. After all, it seemed to be no more than a literary clue and the coincidence of two mothers who'd suffered a mental collapse. By the time the police could ferret out that Allyn was her stepfather, Olivia would be gone.

I stared at Rachel's rucksack and wondered what was bothering me. I pictured Olivia sitting in the breakfast room. Did she feel remorse and emptiness, or satisfaction over a job well done? Had this been just another alternate path for her to plot? I saw her again in the chair next to Aunt Helena's. Snapping and unsnapping her rucksack.

Suddenly I turned to stare at the backpack I'd put on the floor. Olivia's pack. Then whose rucksack did she have in the breakfast room?

"Why are you asking me questions about Olivia?" Rachel asked. I blinked at her for a moment, then my mind cleared.

"You're right, Rachel. It's time to ask Olivia herself."

On our way back to the breakfast room, I stopped to tell

Stemple about Peter Allyn's pack. Everyone jumped up to shoot a volley of questions at the three of us when we entered the room. Everyone except Olivia, who hugged the rucksack closely and stared blindly at her feet.

"Olivia," I said, touching the pack carefully. "We need to examine this."

"No," she said, and tightened her hold. "No. I saved it for my mother."

"I know," I said gently. "But the police need it now. If they can, they'll get it to your mother."

"They can't." Her lip quivered. "I just tried to call her. They told me she died last night."

"I'm terribly sorry. How awful for you."

She shuddered. "Constance Harwell said it truly. Peter Allyn *was* a lady-killer." She handed the pack to me. Stemple took it and, after peering inside, nodded slightly. He disappeared, and then we heard him murmuring on the phone.

"Mother deserved some peace before she died," Olivia said into the strained silence. "I couldn't take away the cancer. I couldn't undo what Peter Allyn had done to her and my sister." Abruptly she raised her head and gave me a hard look. "Why should that monster live after

all the pain he caused? It was right he should die."

"Right is a tricky thing," I said. Even Wordsworth wrote more of geometry and graves than of justice. "I do not know the right of death or life. I'm only the detective."

Stemple cleared his throat. The stolid Stanley White stood next to him in the doorway. "Miss Wells? If you would come with us." Without a word or a glance back, Olivia went with them. The door shut and left a lake of silence behind.

I felt my heart settle into slow steady thumps. The crisis of my coronary receded, carrying with it some of my inner focus. Three days ago I'd stood on the horn of Helm Crag and stared at the flat waters of Windemere. I'd

seen nothing but green and gray. Nearly two hundred years ago, Wordsworth had gazed down at the same sight and seen the breath of God and phantoms pass.

With the vigor of renewed health, I left the breakfast room and its stunned occupants. There was time yet today to conquer the way to Raisbeck and maybe even Mallerstang Edge. I certainly would not walk in the Poet's silence, for I had the noise of Brahms, Aunt Helena, and Robyn ruminating over her maps. God bless them all.

And if in the distance I should see a child slip between the trees or should step by a small footprint near the water's edge, I would think of Lucy Gray

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the February issue.*

On the snowy Saturday before Christmas—in broad daylight—the burglar alarm went off at the jewelry store of Garnett & Sons in downtown Floravale. *Clang-clang-clang* . . . its incessant ringing clashed with the canned carol being piped along Main Street. Officer Rick Jeffers raced to the scene, his overshoes splashing through the sidewalk slush. Good Lord, he thought, my first week on the job and now *this*.

Old Mr. Garnett himself unlocked the front door to admit the young officer.

"What happened?" asked Rick, looking at the crowd of customers standing awkwardly around.

"I'd just waited on a customer," began the owner, "and had two trays of my finest diamonds on the counter. I'd bent over to put one tray back in the display case. I glanced up just in time to see someone reach into the other one and snatch a handful of diamonds—"

"Who?" interrupted Rick.

"That's the problem, officer. All I saw of the thief was that he was very tall and wearing a dark overcoat and hat. His gray muffler was pulled up so I didn't get a good look at his face. I grabbed for him, but he pulled away and mingled with the other customers. I rang the alarm, locking the door. As you can see, there are *seven* exceptionally tall gentlemen—all with dark overcoats and hats and all wearing gray mufflers."

"So you don't know which one did it?" asked Rick, trying to get a handle on the situation.

Garnett beckoned him aside and whispered, "As he moved away, this dropped out of his overcoat pocket. It fell to the floor and got trampled into the tracked-in water there before I could retrieve it." He slipped it to the patrolman.

Rick Jeffers looked. It was a soggy and very dirty envelope. The only part still legible was part of the address: 47 Aster Aven—.

"Does the thief know you found this envelope?" Rick asked in a low voice.

"I doubt it," the old store owner said. "I certainly didn't announce it."

"I'd better phone headquarters," Rick declared.

"Phone's right there behind the rear counter."

Nervously Rick dialed and asked for Detective Ryan. He explained the situation briefly.

"Okay, kid," Hank Ryan said, "just keep a lid on those seven suspects. I'll be there in five minutes."

The rookie patrolman turned to the customers, who were becoming disgruntled and edgy. In his most authoritative voice he announced, "I'd like to speak to you seven gentlemen over there. The rest of you are free to leave."

He began by asking their names and professions. The suspects included Mr. Barber, Mr. Carpenter, Mr. Farmer, Mr. Judge, Mr. Letterman, Mr. Mason, and Mr. Teller. Their professions were barber, carpenter, farmer, judge, postman, mason, and bank teller.

"See here, young man," said the judge, "I know these gentlemen. In fact, we all know one another. This is outrageous. On what grounds are you detaining us?"

"Suspicion of grand larceny," replied Rick, hoping that was a satisfactory reason.

Evidently it was, for the judge declared, "Very well, then. We will try to help you get this misunderstanding cleared up promptly."

Meanwhile, in the warm store, the suspects had removed their heavy overcoats. Rick noted that each was wearing a different colored tie. They included a striped tie, a floral print one, and solid red, green, blue, tan, and brown ties.

"Okay," said Rick, getting his notebook and pencil ready, "who will speak first?"

- (1) Mr. Letterman stepped forward and stated: "My three friends—Art (who's not the man wearing the red tie), Dan, and Gus (who is not the gentleman residing on Rose Road)—include the mason (who doesn't live on Lilac Lane), the man who lives on Aster Avenue (who is neither Mr. Judge nor the man with the floral tie), and the man wearing the green tie."
- (2) Mr. Teller said, "Mr. Letterman, Mr. Carpenter (who is neither Hal nor the judge), and I are Pat (who doesn't reside on



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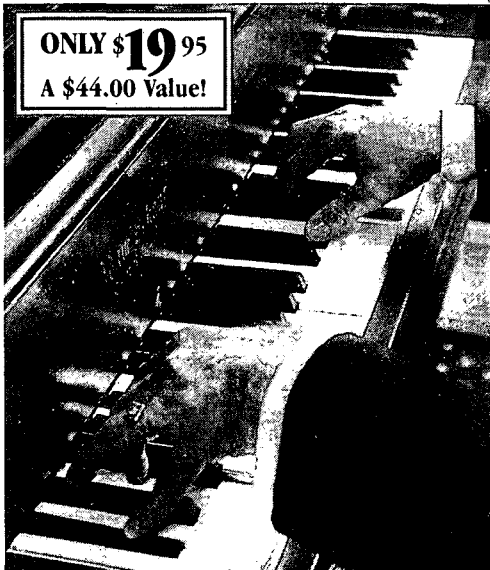
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Peony Place), my friend who lives on Lilac Lane (who's not the man in the green tie), and the one wearing the floral print necktie. None of us is the farmer."

- (3) Mr. Mason then declared, "Vic (not the man in the blue tie), my friend from Begonia Boulevard, and I are the teller (who doesn't live on Wisteria Way), the farmer (not the man in the brown tie), and the carpenter (who is neither Pat nor the man in the blue tie). Obviously, none of us is wearing the tan necktie."
- (4) Mr. Farmer spoke, "The judge, my friend wearing the blue tie, and I live on Rose Road, Peony Place, and Dahlia Circle. Hal lives elsewhere. Dan will verify everything I've said."
- (5) Mr. Judge then said: "The men wearing the brown tie (who isn't Mr. Mason), the red one (not worn by Vic), and the striped one (not worn by the barber) are the carpenter, Sam (who's not the postman), and I. None of us lives on Rose Road, nor does Mr. Teller."
- (6) The man in the green tie declared, "I'm not Gus or the carpenter."
- (7) The man in the tan tie then said, "Just for the record, I'm not the one living on Wisteria Way (who also isn't Mr. Letterman)."

Rick Jeffers was glad when Detective Ryan arrived. He briefed him on the statements and added, "It's pretty complicated, sir. You see, Mr. Barber is not the barber, Mr. Carpenter's not the carpenter, Mr. Farmer doesn't farm, Mr. Judge isn't the judge, Mr. Letterman isn't the postman, Mr. Mason doesn't do masonry, and Mr. Teller doesn't work in a bank."

"Yeah? There's only seven of them, could be a lot worse. You say that envelope was addressed to somebody living on Aster Avenue?"

"That's right," interrupted Mr. Garnett eagerly. "I've got it here, sir."

Ryan turned back to Rick. "Are your notes correct?" he asked. "That's *exactly* what each said?"

"Oh yes," replied the rookie patrolman. "I was very careful about that. But it's all very confusing."

"Confusing?" snorted the detective. "Boy, it's perfectly clear who did it."

He strode over to the seven suspects and declared, "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, I'm placing you under arrest for the theft of diamonds in this store. Anything you say can and may be used against you . . ." He rattled off the rest of the familiar warning.

*What is the full name and profession of the man who yielded to the temptation of glittering diamonds?*

---

See page 145 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

FICTION

# The Whole Nine Yards

Sam Pizzo

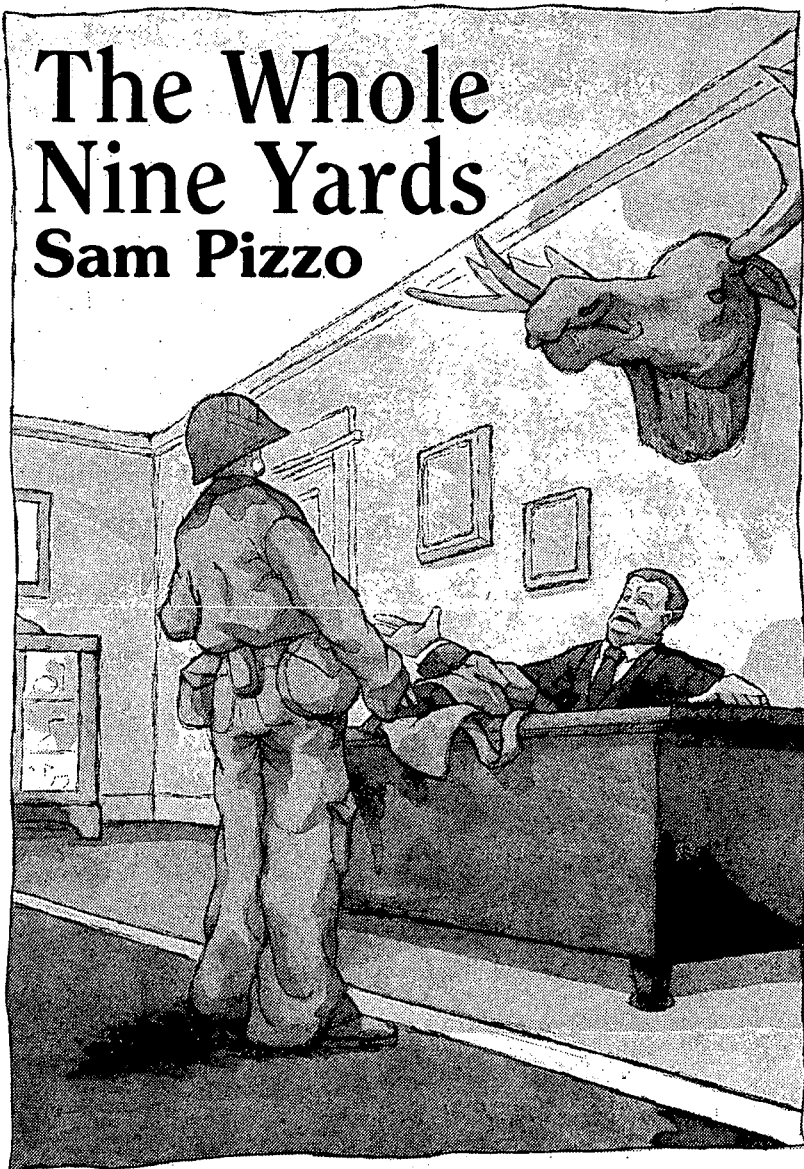


Illustration by Jim Adams

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/96

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**A**lbert marched past the secretary into his father's private office without knocking. He thumped his backpack on his father's desk and unzipped it. Albert peered inside. His thermos had shifted from one side to the other, smashing his doughnut and squirting jelly all over his .38 revolver. The doughnut was a mess . . . but tasty.

"Have some coffee, Albert," said Albert's father, shouldering the phone and swiveling his chair beneath a large moosehead.

Albert hated that moose. He didn't like the eyes, the way they followed him no matter where he stood. Staring. Albert took three giant steps toward the coffeepot, then wheeled around. Beady eyes.

The first thing Albert would do when he took over the company would be to get rid of the moose. Take it to the dump. Or burn it maybe. Did it move? Or did Albert imagine it? Now it was smiling. Albert hated that.

"Chew your food one hundred times," said Albert's father, swiveling to face Albert and hanging up the phone.

. . . ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. Albert drew his sleeve across his mouth.

"Use a napkin, Albert."

Do this, Albert. Do that, Albert. Albert was tired of being told what to do. He drew one sleeve across his mouth, then the other.

"Jelly stains won't come out, Albert," said Albert's father.

Albert didn't care. He was grown up, and he could have jelly stains if he wanted.

"Yes, you are grown up," said Albert's father, "and I see you've been to the attic all by yourself."

How did he know Albert had been to the attic?

"Because you're wearing your Grandpa Sherman's World War II fatigues and steel helmet."

So?

"So, you look macho, Albert."

Albert had to admit he was thinking the same thing. Albert thought he looked like Rambo. Of course, Rambo was taller, more muscular, much broader in the shoulders, with a deeper voice, thicker, blacker, wavier hair, a heavier jaw, twenty-twenty vision, and his fatigues fit better.

"Macho is in the heart, Albert, not in the clothes," said Albert's father. "We can roll up the pants legs and sleeves two or three turns, and if we stuff some paper in the helmet, it will improve your vision."

Albert swaggered to the wet bar to check himself out in the mirror. Left-face! He checked his right profile. About-face! Albert checked his left pro . . . The moose was watching, wasn't he? Big as life. Albert would ignore it. He would never look at the moose again. Albert looked. Wink! Albert hated that.

"What are you planning to do with that revolver, Albert?"

Albert's father would find out as soon as Albert finished his doughnut.

"Are you planning to shoot something, Albert?"

That was about the long and the short of it, yes.

"Something animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

Albert wasn't sure. Would he repeat the question?

"This thing you intend to shoot, Albert, is it a person?"

Albert's father guessed that one pretty quick.

"This person, Albert, is it somebody I know?"

One could say that, yes.

"This person, Albert, is it the same person who burned your toast this morning?"

Bingo!

"I didn't burn your toast intentionally, Albert."

Heck, Albert liked burned toast.

"Is it because I let you win at checkers last night?"

Albert would take a win any way he could get it.

"If you shoot me, Albert, I'll bleed on the new carpet."

Albert wished his father hadn't said that. The thought of blood always made him woozy. Maybe he'd sit for a few minutes. Put his feet up. Be good as new . . . soon.

"And when a person dies, Albert, his body does . . . his body does . . . you know . . . number . . ."

Was Albert's father talking about number . . . ?

"That's right, Albert."

What about . . . ?

"That, too, Albert."

That was the most ridiculous thing Albert had ever heard. Albert had been to college. They would not have withheld information like that from Albert if it were true.

"I'm sure they would have taught it to you," said Albert's father, "if you had stayed for the entire first semester."

Perhaps Albert would take his father to the men's room, shoot him in one of the stalls, slam the door.

"If you kill me, Albert, who will take over the company?"

That was the point. Albert would take over. He wanted the whole nine yards. Albert liked that expression. He repeated it. The whole nine yards.

"I'll double your salary, Albert."

A generous offer, but too late. Albert had made funeral arrangements.

"I'll promote you to president of the company, Albert, president and messenger."

Albert didn't want to be president or messenger. He wanted to take over so he could sell the company.

"It won't do any good to kill me, Albert. I don't own the company."

He was lying. Albert had never known his father to lie to him before.

"I'm not lying, Albert. Your mother owns the company. She inherited it from her father. I just run it."

Then Albert would have to shoot his mother.

"It wouldn't be proper to take your mother to the men's room, Albert."

Albert hadn't thought of that.

"It won't do any good to kill your mother either, Albert. She has a will and when she dies, everything she owns goes into a trust for you. You'll get regular monthly payments from the trust for the rest of your life. When you die . . ."

Albert wished his father hadn't said that. The thought of dying always made him woozy. Just have to sit for a minute. Put his head between his legs . . . breathe . . . be good as new . . . soon.

" . . . and when you die, Albert, the trust terminates and all the money goes to charity."

Albert didn't know that. Things were getting too complicated. His mind was twisting this way and that. His thoughts were bumping into each other. He wished he could take a nap. She said it was going to be easy.

"Who is 'she,' Albert?"

Just somebody Albert knew.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Albert?"

Just because Albert knew a girl didn't mean he had a girlfriend.

"Last night you didn't touch your hot cocoa, and you didn't play with your white mice."

He had Albert there. Albert loved hot cocoa, and he loved his white mice more than anything—until now. His father was a lot smarter than he thought.



"Is she pretty, Albert?"

When she smiles.

"Does she smile often?"

Only when Albert gives her money.

"Do you give her a lot of money, Albert?"

Albert gave her a whole bunch of money, and she took off her coveralls. She let Albert look at it.

"Look at what, Albert?"

Her black belt. Haiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii YAAAAHHHHH!

"That scared me, Albert."

Scared Albert, too.

"Does she work here, Albert?"

In the furnace room.

"Which one is she, Albert?"

The one with the chrome toolbox.

"And the big . . . ?"

The big . . . yes.

"That one is my girlfriend, Albert."

That was the dumbest thing Albert had ever heard. Albert's father was married and married men don't have girlfriends. They have wives.

"Married men are not supposed to have girlfriends, Albert, but sometimes they do. I became . . . friendly with her when your mother and I had that terrible fight."

Albert didn't remember any fight.

"It happened the day you took your mother's canary into the pool to give it a bath."

It was coming back now. It wasn't Albert's fault. Albert's book said birds enjoy a bath.

"Your mother was very fond of that canary, Albert. And she was very angry with you. That's why she decided to teach you how to swim."

Albert remembered that, too. It was a strange way to give swimming lessons by holding his head under water.

"And I came home just in time to shoot her with the tranquilizer gun."

Albert appreciated that.

"Your mother didn't, Albert. That's why she trashed your room and cut off their tails with a carving knife."

Albert was still upset about that. He'd never seen such a sight in his life.

"And when she got the bill from the plastic surgeon, she put us out of the house, Albert. That's why you and I have been living in the guest house."

Albert had wondered about that.

"She'll calm down in a few months, Albert, and we'll be able to move back into the main house."

Albert would not be around. She was waiting. They had a plane to catch.

"Are you going to San Diablo to fight in the revolution, Albert?"

How did he know about San Diablo? That was their secret place, hers and Albert's.

"It was our secret place, too, Albert. We were going to fight side by side in the jungles of San Diablo, and when the revolution was won, we would spend the rest of our lives in the mountains above San Diablo lazing about in the cool of the verandah and drinking tequila."

That's what she and Albert were going to do, except that Albert didn't like the taste of tequila.

"And we would have lots of babies and servants to take care of them."

She and Albert were going to have servants and babies, too.

"I think we have a problem, Albert."

Albert wasn't aware of any problem.

"We can't both go, Albert."

Why not?

"I don't think it would be proper for us to share her, Albert."

Albert's father had always encouraged Albert to share. He said it wasn't right to be selfish.

"I'm not being selfish, Albert. It's just not right for two men to share the same woman."

Albert didn't understand why the three of them couldn't live together. She and Albert would . . . you know . . . and his father wouldn't.

"The three of us could live together," said Albert's father, "but it would be better if she and I would . . . you know . . . and you wouldn't."

Albert was becoming aware of the problem.

"She doesn't love either of us, Albert. She just wants my money to support the Freedom Fighters and the revolution."

That wasn't true. She said she loved Albert.

"She said she loved me, too, Albert, but I wouldn't give her my money, so she put you up to killing me."

Just a darned minute. Albert's father said he didn't have any money, that everything belonged to his mother.

"It does, Albert. The property, the business, and all the machinery belong to your mother," said Albert's father. "But I've been . . . borrowing from the business for over twenty-five years. For every pound of sausage we ground, packaged, and sold in the last twenty-five years I put two cents in a special place for myself, sort of a retirement plan. Do you realize how many tons of sausage we've sold in the last twenty-five years, Albert?"

Albert didn't even like to think about sausage.

"We have sold over fifty thousand tons of sausage, Albert, and at two cents per pound it comes to over two million dollars."

Albert's father had two million dollars?

"Right here in this suitcase, Albert."

Albert would take it. She was waiting.

"It's all yours, Albert," said Albert's father. "But don't give her the money all at once or she won't need you any more. And on your way out of town, be sure to pick up some insect repellent. The mosquitoes in the swamps are fierce."

Mosquitoes? Swamps? Albert didn't know they had swamps and mosquitoes in the jungle.

"You probably won't get malaria, Albert."

Malaria? Albert didn't like malaria. Maybe Albert should think about that.

"It's your choice, Albert."

Albert didn't like choices. It was difficult for him to make decisions:

Enie, meenie, miney, moe,

Catch a tiger by the toe.

If he hollers, let him go,

Enie, meenie, miney, moe.

Albert thought he would go in spite of the swamps, mosquitoes, and malaria.

"And be sure to keep your white mice in their cage at all times," said Albert's father. "The jungle is full of snakes, and snakes eat mice in one gulp."

Snakes? One gulp?

"Pythons, boa constrictors."

Albert would have to think about that too:

Inkey, binkey, bonkey,  
Daddy had a donkey.  
Donkey died, daddy cried,  
Inkey, binkey, bonkey.

Albert thought he might . . .

"One more thing," said Albert's father. "Take lots of Cokes and chips with you. They don't have Cokes and chips in the jungle."

No Cokes? No chips?

"Conditions are very primitive in the jungle, Albert."

Albert couldn't remember ever having to make so many important decisions:

One potato, two potato,  
Three potato, four.  
Five potato, six potato,  
Seven potato more.

My mother said to choose this one.

Oh, oh.

My mother said to choose this one *here*.

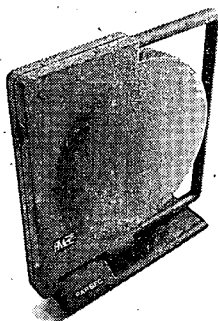
The decision had been made. Albert was not going to San Diablo.

"I've made a decision, too, Albert. I'm going to do something meaningful with my life. I'm going to stand up and be counted, put my money where my mouth is, join in the struggle against oppression. I'm going to San Diablo, Albert. Down with tyranny! Take care of your mother and the business. Hand me that suitcase, will you, Albert? Down with injustice! Death to the oppressors! Come see us, Albert. Long live the revolution! I'm coming, my little vixen!"

Albert bought a Coke and a bag of chips from the vending machines and returned to his father's . . . to *Albert's* office. He sat in his father's . . . in *Albert's* swivel chair. Maybe Albert could learn to take an interest in sausage, start his own retirement plan. If his father had borrowed two cents per pound, maybe Albert could borrow four cents per . . . The moose was watching, wasn't he? Albert could feel it. Albert was in charge now, and the moose's days were numbered. He would not give the moose the satisfaction of looking. Albert clapped his hands over his eyes. He peeked between his fingers. The moose raised and lowered his eyebrows twice in an instant. Albert hated that.

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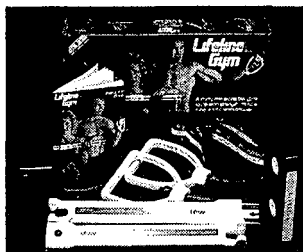


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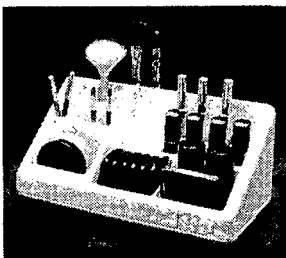


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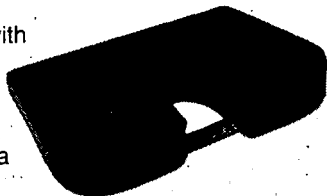


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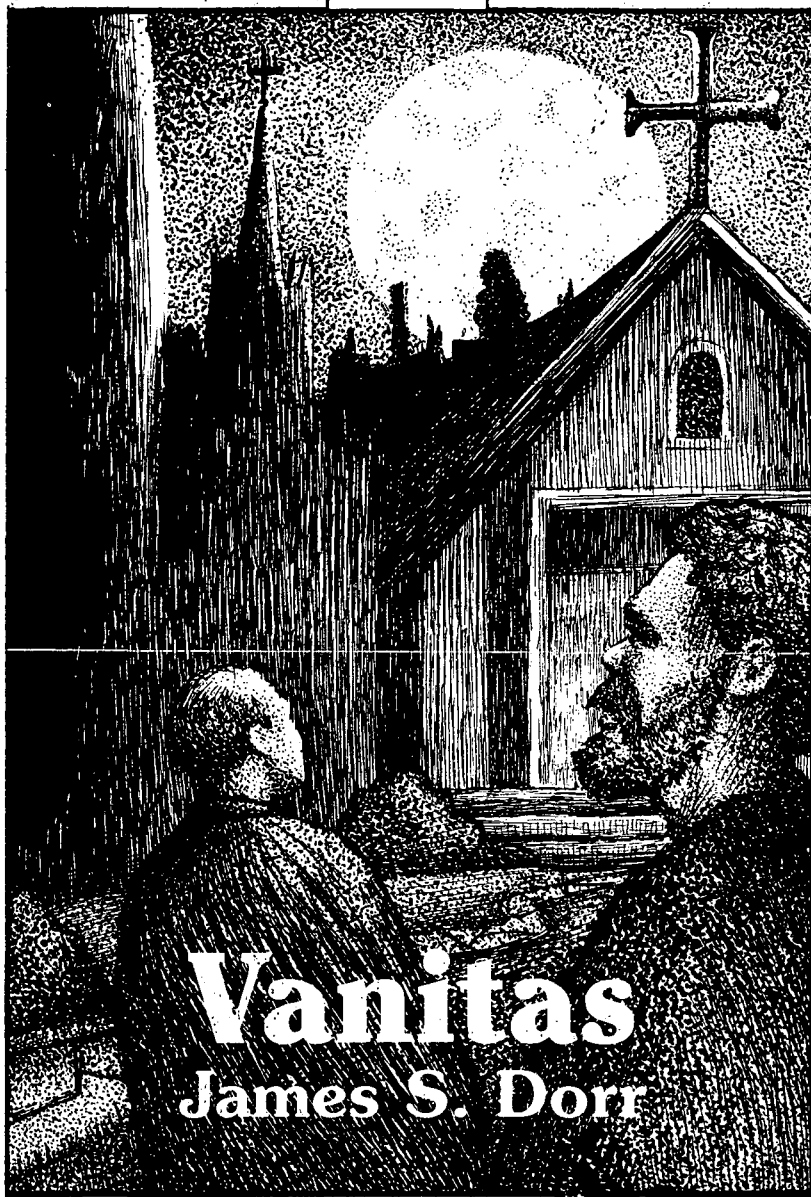
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FICTION



# Vanitas

James S. Dorr

*Illustration by Mark Penta*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/96*

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*Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas.*

Ecclesiastes 1:2

**C**aleb Rushton came from the sea, from a world where sail—and the seamen needed to mount ships' rigging—were fast giving way to the devils of soot and steam. He traveled west from his home port of Boston through Worcester and Springfield until he came to the town of Vanitas on the east edge of the Berkshire Mountains. He liked the way the air smelled there, the way the hollyhocks bloomed in the spring, and though he had long since lost faith in religion, he used his shipborn carpentry skills to gain a position as church sexton.

Then, early that autumn, a traveling circus came into the mountains, north to their valley. It gave one performance, one which he did not see.

The following morning the church choirmaster, Pietro Mezzoni, a dark-haired, normally brooding man who Rushton had been told had come to Vanitas from the New Haven Conservatory just two years before, approached him as he began his duties. "Did you watch the circus parade?" Mezzoni asked.

"A little of it," Rushton replied. "We all watched at least some."

"What did you think of the bareback rider? You know the church elders did not approve."

"I caught a glimpse," Rushton said. "Only that, though. I had to return here—the roof needs rebuilding before the fall rains come."

The choirmaster nodded slowly. "Did you hear the music?"

"A bit, yes," Rushton said. "It was loud and full of whistles. Too loud for my taste. That was one reason I went back inside."

"Ah yes, loud indeed," the choirmaster said. "Played properly, though, you might like it better." He gave a knowing smile—Rushton understood he had performed as well as taught music in Connecticut and was considered, at least by himself, an expert in the classical era. He did not know, though, why the choirmaster left there.

The choirmaster went on. "There's been a fire. The tent the circus people were in burned down late last night, while most of us here in town were sleeping. Reverend Hawkings is out there right now, but I've already been there so I can tell you you'll have a full day's work in the graveyard. What I wished to ask you, though, is if you know how to repair steam engines."

Rushton frowned. He had fled here hoping to leave such things behind him, and yet he did

know something of steam's workings. "Small engines, yes," he finally said. "The donkey engines some of the newest ships use to raise anchor. Larger ones, though . . ."

The choirmaster cut him off, suddenly kneeling. "God does His will in mysterious ways," he said in a low voice. Then he looked up again at the sexton.

"The one I have in mind is a small one."

"Vanitas," Rushton had said the first time he met Reverend Hawkings, "seems like a rather strange name for a town."

"It's very old," the minister had replied. "Just as the town is. Just as the church is. But while it may be old fashioned, it helps us remember. It speaks to our failings."

Rushton remembered that now as he poked with the choirmaster through the ashes of tents and wagons. The main tent, the cook tent, the sleeping tents, all had burned when the flames spread, easily leaping from one to another while, as Mezzoni said, those within slept. After a discussion, Reverend Hawkings had gained permission from the elders to lay them at rest in hallowed ground. At least those bodies that could be found.

But the choirmaster and Rushton were not searching

through the ashes for corpses. Rather, the choirmaster led him to a half-burned wagon, its once bright paint now blackened and blistered. He took his walking stick and prodded what had been its curtained side, pulling the smoke-stained cloth from its sliders.

"What do you think of this?" he asked finally.

Rushton peered inside the wagon and saw the soot-blackened brass of machinery. "It's a bit larger than what I'm used to," he said as he leaned forward to look more closely. "I'd say it's about a fifteen horsepower. Vertical boiler. I don't know about these valves and pipes here—I'll have to figure out what they were used for—but yes, given time, I think I could fix it."

The choirmaster looked relieved. "What those valves on the top were for was making music—that whistling music you didn't care for. This is a recent device, you see, but one I'd heard something of back in New Haven. What it is is a kind of instrument called a *calliope*—sometimes they use them on riverboats, too. But what I intend us to do with this one is repair it and mount it in the church tower."

Rushton reached into the shadowed interior and worked the valves, his interest aroused

in spite of himself. He leaned farther in and inspected the solder around the boiler, the spot welds and rivets, then prodded a few of the fittings that seemed loose.

"Yes," he said, "I think we could do that. We'll need some help with the heavier work, though."

"We'll get what we need," the choirmaster said. "I've already had a talk with the church elders. Tell me this now, though. Do you think you can make it more powerful? Twenty or even twenty-five horsepower? Possibly thirty?"

"Maybe," Rushton said. "Too much and the boiler tubes won't take it, but it's good work that went into this engine. I think I can do that. But what will it be for?"

The choirmaster smiled. "You know how the church is in ill repair. You've been fixing the roof, you've told me about that. About the damage the water has done. But my concern has been with the church music. The little spinet I have to play on is not only direly inadequate for its task, but is in poor repair itself. And yet every time I approach the church elders, even with Reverend Hawkings on my side, although he's too spineless to be of much help . . . well, you know how they are about money. That is, up until now."

The choirmaster paused, then muttered beneath his breath, "God helps them that help themselves." Speaking more loudly, he stared straight into Rushton's eyes. "Do you know who said that?"

Rushton pulled back, startled. "You know I'm not much on studying the Bible . . ."

The choirmaster laughed. "It's not in the Bible. One of our nation's patriots wrote that, Benjamin Franklin. Not only a patriot but an inventor. And that's exactly what we're going to do, Rushton: be inventors, too, with God's help or not. With this calliope as its center, we're going to build the church an organ."

To Rushton's surprise, the church's elders had not only endorsed the project, but even had their own ideas for improvements. He overheard them once in the church basement, near the locked room the choirmaster used to store his music.

"It will be big?" one of them said, at first reluctantly but then beginning to warm to his topic.

"Yes," said the choirmaster. "Bigger than even the bellows organ they have up in Westfield."

"And," said another, "you're sure it won't cost too much?"

"No," said the choirmaster.

"Caleb Rushton is a good builder—that is his blessing—and my plan is to build this organ right into the fabric of the church, making it part of his general repair work." He stared at the elder much as he had at Rushton before, and the scene had seemed frozen just for a moment before he continued. "In short, much of what we will do has been budgeted for already. And as for the other—" once more he paused and stared—"that, remember, we found for free at the site of the circus fire."

"Ah yes," said a third elder, coughing slightly. "The terrible tragedy. But getting back to the organ at Westfield, we might make it even bigger than that? Like in the Roman cathedral at Worcester."

"Yes, bigger and louder than even at the cathedral at Worcester. And not only that, but with improvements to the keyboard, it will allow me to play *all* church music, including the classics. Including even music too difficult for most organs."

Rushton had been careful not to be seen when he had listened to that conversation. He knew the choirmaster had a temper. Try as he would, though, the work still went slowly, especially as the plans were enlarged. And then, not long after he began, the first of the apparitions

came, which slowed the work on the church even further.

It was about the middle of October when Rushton and the choirmaster saw it. The rains had come at the end of September, forcing a halt to work, but now the weather had turned crisp but pleasant, at least in the daytime, and Rushton was on the roof showing the other the ductwork he had built into the roof slates to recondense water to feed the boiler. Mezzoni saw it first—at least he stopped and stared, back toward the church tower—and when Rushton turned to look as well, he saw what seemed like the figure of a woman peering at them through the tower louvers.

He scrambled forward to look more closely, the choirmaster following just behind him, but once they had gotten into the tower and threaded their way through the pipes and whistles that nearly filled its upper chamber, whatever it was they had seen was no longer there.

"A word of caution," the choirmaster said as they climbed back down through the tower's midsection, where the boiler itself was now installed; passing the choir loft with its unfinished console perched like an eyrie beneath the main roof peak. "Hawkings tries to preach the Bible just as he learned it in seminary, but old beliefs don't

always die all that easily. Some of those helping you are superstitious."

"You think then," Rushton said, "we should not tell them what we saw just now? That is, what we think we saw?"

"Yes," said Mezzoni. "Just as you say, what we *think* we saw. With all this machinery packed above us, who knows what tricks light might play? Sunlight glancing off a brass fitting? Perhaps a trapped bird flying out from a shadow? The shadows themselves, Rushton—eyes can be fooled, you know."

"I know," Rushton said as they continued down past the balcony that ringed three sides of the church's main floor. "Luckily, most of the heavier work up there has been done, although you still have your own work to do with the linkages and the organ keyboard. But underneath . . ."

The choirmaster nodded. "What do you call it? The engine firebox?"

"The firebox, yes. It may not be so easy." Rushton pointed to two deep channels that had already been carved in the stone of the tower's thick side walls. "These lead to the furnace in the basement—when they're done, they'll be slated over to form pipes to carry the furnace fire up to the boiler. But it takes skill in brick and stone work,

skill you don't learn at sea. Skill to insulate the piping so people aren't roasted when they pass between them. Skill to vent the heat after it's used, through the top of the tower. Skill to make the channels strong so they'll hold the air when, like the steam, it expands as it's heated . . ."

The choirmaster nodded, following Rushton through the vestibule at the tower's base into the church proper. "If there *should* be trouble with your workmen, we can bring more in from out of town." He held up his hand when Rushton turned toward him, anticipating the sexton's protest. "I know," he said, his voice suddenly lowering. "It would cost more money. But if it's needed, I'll deal with the elders. They have their reasons, you see, to want this organ completed. They want it to play loud—that's why I had you improve the boiler so it will be able to produce more power. They want it to be so loud, in fact, that the hymns we play will drown out those of all the other churches. Given their choice, they would like to see it completed by Christmas, the birth of our Savior, but even if that were not to be—" Mezzoni paused, staring at the floor for a long moment before he went on in almost a whisper "—but, if

that should not be, they would still have reasons."

The organ was nearly not completed. On All Hallows' Eve, the apparition was seen again, the form of a woman clearly outlined on the tower roof, and this time not just by Mezzoni and Rushton. Mezzoni, in fact, had been inside the church, taking something down to the basement. But Rushton and Reverend Hawkings saw it from the churchyard, under the light of a just rising full moon, and worse, one or two of the other villagers still on the street claimed to see it also.

By the next morning the story had passed from house to house, some versions saying it was a witch, some saying the devil, and yet others saying that many devils, both male and female, had been seen in Vanitas. Reverend Hawkings gave a sermon on "The Folly of Superstition" the following Sunday, but the rumors still persisted and, with them, the fear that the rumors engendered. In fact, they might never have stopped had the weather not turned suddenly cold the first week of November, keeping people inside in the evenings where they were less apt to see visions of any sort. And yet there were some who feared the church now and, despite the minister's personal

pleadings, refused to set foot in it even in daylight.

This slowed the work further, even though Rushton and Reverend Hawkings, who seemed himself to have become infected with the zeal that burned in the church elders, now worked side by side with those who remained to them of the masons. Despite their lack of skill, they often labored on into the evening after the regular workers had gone home, completing the sealing of the furnace, then the fire channels to the boiler, while up above in the tiny choir loft Mezzoni continued his work on the keyboards. At times they heard rustlings, like rats in the basement, and at other times gravelike silence. And sometimes, too, they saw the apparition again, always of what seemed to be a young woman, her hair as black as the wing of a raven, always flitting just out of their vision when they tried to look at it more directly.

"Mezzoni!" Rushton called once to the choir loft when he and the minister thought they had seen it dash down a side balcony. The choirmaster's head appeared over the loft rail, his hand raised to silence them, then disappeared again. Rushton and Hawkings mounted the tower stairs, hoping to ask him if he had seen it, too, but when

they reached the eyrie, they found it was empty.

They sat down and rested, admiring Mezzoni's work, seeing how he had combined the keys of the calliope and the spinet into an organ's double manual, using the plectra and slides of the latter to operate valves he had had Rushton forge to his specifications. They looked at the pedals, and the stops on the side panels of the console, some built from scratch, others adapted from things he had found in the burned circus wagon.

"Have you noticed," the minister finally said, "how the smell of the circus fire still lingers up here? As if it were burned into the very metal of the engine's fittings. I don't like it, Caleb."

"What do you mean?" Rushton answered. "You mean the organ? Then why are you helping?"

The minister sighed. "Sometimes I ask myself. The elders want it—that should be enough. And what could be wrong with playing music that rises straight up to Heaven and God? But then I look in our choirmaster's eyes and what I see there . . ."

"What do you mean, reverend?" Rushton prodded.

"The fire that burns *inside*. It's somehow unholy, and yet it affects me, too. And have you

seen how gaunt his face looks of late? Almost as if he hasn't been eating? Those are the signs of a guilty conscience. The signs of a man who is keeping some secret. Or more than one secret. And then I ask myself, what could that secret be?"

Rushton nodded. "I know he keeps much to himself these days. That is, even more than he used to before. But what are you getting at?"

"Don't you see, Caleb? It all comes back to fire. Fire in a circus tent, late at night when everyone else in our town was sleeping. A burned-out wagon, and yet the machinery inside it surviving. And Mezzoni *lives* to build that organ . . ."

Rushton thought back to the morning after the fire and how Mezzoni had asked him then if he had witnessed the circus parade. And how the choirmaster had dwelt so specifically on its music.

"Surely you don't mean," he said in a hushed, unbelieving whisper, "that you think *he* set it?"

October had come and gone, and then November. With harvest season upon the village, even the few workmen who remained faithful had little time to spare for the church, and so the work went even more slowly. And yet, midway through



December, the organ itself was finally completed, leaving only repainting and furbishment to get the building ready for Christmas.

Mezzoni spent most of his time in the loft now, adjusting and testing, or else in his music room in the basement beneath the vestry. Even Rushton could see the haggardness that had come over him, wasting the choirmaster's already thin body until he looked as insubstantial as the female apparition that still was seen at night, now and again, as the sexton and minister scrubbed and cleaned, and sanded the long pews and touched up their scrollwork, and generally made sure all things would be proper for the holiest of the year's festivals. And then came the first snows, and with them a quietness as the town drew into itself, its people confined to their farms and houses. Rushton worked outside some of the time now, clearing the paths for those who did come for low Sunday services—sometimes no more than the elders themselves—but during the rest of the week the three who had worked together since the fall were as often as not the only ones there.

Rushton had nearly forgotten by then what Reverend Hawkings had told him before, about his suspicions. But then one

morning when he was carrying wood from the churchyard down to the firebox bin in the basement, the minister drew him aside a second time.

"I've seen it," Reverend Hawkings said. "Another enigma. I couldn't sleep last night and so, in my restlessness, I put my clothes on and came to the church. Above, I saw candlelight—Mezzoni still working up in the choir loft—and then, below him, again in the balcony, a flash of white like a woman's nightdress."

"Ah," Rushton said, "our apparition." He loaded the minister's arms with wood. "And did you pursue her?"

Hawkings shook his head. "No," he said. They entered the side door of the church, both with their arms full, and heard far above them the faint clicking sounds of the choirmaster working the valve cocks on top of the boiler, tuning the organ as best he could without actual music. "No," he said again as they went down the stairs, letting their eyes adjust to the gloom below. "Rather, I came down here—I don't know why I did. But I found myself walking these very stairs, passing the furnace and the woodbin, until I came to Mezzoni's music room. Then I reached out to test the door latch."

"And of course found it

locked," Rushton said. They had reached the woodbin and carefully stacked their burden inside and now sat together, catching their breath before going back upstairs.

"No," Reverend Hawkings said. "Oh, it's locked now. I tried it again just before I came outside. But last night, when I pushed on the door latch, I found it was *unlocked*. I went inside quietly, shielding my candle against any drafts, noting as I did that the latch only locked from the outside. I saw stacks of music as we would expect. Both sacred and secular. But then I also saw in a corner a pallet that looked as if it had been slept on."

"Ah," Rushton said. He motioned toward the stairs, indicating that there were many more loads of firewood for them to take down.

"Another moment," the minister said. "I thought at first that perhaps Mezzoni himself slept here sometimes, on nights when he worked too late to go back to the house he boards at without waking others. But then I saw a dish and a bowl—and neither well cleaned. And then I saw something else. A wardrobe, its door half open. And inside that wardrobe I saw what looked to me like wisps and scraps of a woman's clothing."

"Ah," Rushton said again.

"That explains something. You think our ghostly figure might be an actual flesh-and-blood woman?" He paused for a moment, and then continued. "And the plate also. That explains something else—Mezzoni's gauntness. If perhaps he's taking his food to her. Sharing it with her. If what you say is right, he couldn't very well ask his housekeeper to cook extra for him. But still—" he started to get up "—still there's the question of why, Reverend Hawkings. Why would he keep her *here*, in the church?"

"I don't know, Caleb," the minister said, getting up also. "Perhaps for his pleasure. Perhaps for some power he needs to maintain over other people—you've seen how his eyes look. You know I don't like it. There's some sense of evil about this whole business . . ."

Rushton shrugged as he led the minister upstairs to the stack of wood in the churchyard. Again he began to load the other's arms. "You think it's something to do with the organ? Mezzoni doesn't tell me much about it, but he did mention some special service."

"I don't know," the minister said. "There will be a service on Christmas Eve, for the church elders only, to test the organ. That's what all this wood is for—for stoking the firebox."

And it *must* be ready because the elders want it to be played for the whole town at the regular service on Christmas morning. But this . . . this thing with the woman now. I just don't know, Caleb."

"Have you gone to the elders about it?"

Hawkings shook his head. "I don't dare to," he said. "Haven't you noticed? There's something about them, too. Something that frightens me. Something that seems to bind all this together. I know I *will* have it out with Mezzoni though—that much I must do."

The minister stopped while they went back downstairs with their new burdens and came up again to the snow of the churchyard. He looked about them, as if to be sure no one else could hear him.

"There's one thing more, Caleb," he finally said, "about what I found in Mezzoni's music room. About that wardrobe. Some of the clothes inside it had burn marks."

The winter sun had scarcely risen when Rushton heard the scream the next morning. He had just unlocked the church's side entrance and gone inside when his eye caught movement up in the choir loft. He had seen two figures—or had it been three?—at the moment when the

taller one toppled over the choir rail and fell shrieking, to land with a sickening thump on the floor below, barely two dozen feet from where he was standing.

"*Oh God,*" he whispered, the words strangely reverent in his mouth. He took one more glance up and saw—Mezzoni! He called out, "*Wait!*," then ran to the crumpled form that lay on the stone of the main aisle and, finding it already no longer breathing, turned it over.

The face he stared at now was Reverend Hawkings'.

He heard in the back of his mind the sound of running footsteps within the tower. Remembering what Reverend Hawkings had told him the morning before, he did not run to the tower himself, but whipping his coat off and laying it over the minister's face, he dashed to the side stairs and plunged down into the gloom of the vaulted basement below. He rushed past the furnace and its filled woodbin, twisting and turning through the dim passages until he came to Mezzoni's music room with its door now ajar, outlined in light from a lantern inside.

He pushed the door open and saw the choirmaster moving his hands in circles and patterns, as if conducting some unseen orchestra. Except that, farther within, a second, female form,

its face veiled in shadow, made similar signs back as if replying. And then Mezzoni turned, suddenly facing him.

Rushton spoke first. "You killed him!" he shouted. He pointed toward the figure that still stood half-hidden in shadow. "The reverend found out—about your woman. He told me he was going to confront you. Perhaps he told you then that he had decided to inform the church elders, not only about that, but how you set the circus fire, too, to steal their organ. And then you . . . you pushed him!"

Mezzoni shook his head. "Yes," he said, "Hawkings did tell me about his suspicions. But I didn't push him. Rather, he fell because he was a coward, because as he was accosting me up there he suddenly found himself face to face with something he never expected to see. Something that frightened him. Your 'apparition.' Because it had not occurred to him that he might recognize her . . ."

"What?" Rushton exploded. "You mean you expect me to believe he killed *himself*?"

"In a sense, yes. He backed away, frightened—at least badly startled—and lost his balance. There's no need to shout, though." The choirmaster paused and smiled, gesturing toward the woman behind him.

"You see, she can't hear you. She too has been frightened, more frightened perhaps than you or I could even imagine, losing her sense of both hearing and speech in that selfsame fire Hawkings accused me of starting."

"The better for you, then, isn't it?" Rushton said. "That she's a mute so she can't speak against you. Because I'm beginning to put it together, that Reverend Hawkings was only half right. That you set the fire, yes, but not for the organ. Or maybe it, too, but what you really set it for was to cover your tracks when you kidnapped *her*—for a woman, Mezzoni!"

The choirmaster laughed, a humorless laugh, then motioned with his hand. "She is attractive, Rushton," he said. "And I think, despite my admonitions to keep to herself on her occasional roamings, she's starting to take a shine to you. Her name is Sophia."

He made another sign with his hand, and she stepped forward into the light. Beneath her long, raven hair was a face Rushton recognized, too—that of the circus's bareback rider.

"*Monster!*" Rushton hissed. "Murderer! Devil! The elders *will* hear of this . . ."

Mezzoni raised his hand. "Devil? Perhaps. But, no, you will not tell the church elders of

this." He stared at Rushton, and Rushton found himself staring back into the choirmaster's eyes. Seeing the fire there. "Even if you should, they would not listen. Instead, they will make the necessary arrangements for Hawkings' body, holding it here beneath the church against the spring when the ground becomes thawed enough for its burial. And for Christmas Eve, just a week from tonight, for our test of the organ . . ."

"Our test of the organ," Rushton repeated, not realizing that he had spoken at all. The woman had gone—he did not know where to. But he felt himself more and more transfixed by Mezzoni's gaze. Feeling the heat there. The sense of foreboding that Hawkings had spoken of . . . and something else also.

"Our trial, yes. Remember, the elders have already planned it. If need be, they will read the service themselves. Then, for after, for Christmas morning, perhaps they will bring in a circuit preacher. Perhaps something different—that does not concern you. But for the testing, you're part of this, Rushton, whether you will it to be so or not. You helped build the organ."

Rushton nodded. He had built the organ. And will it or not, he knew that, whatever else might be in store, he would do what

ever the choirmaster asked him to do.

The heat was oppressive. Outside was the Eve of the birth of the Lord, the ground swathed in whiteness, but within the church, as Rushton climbed the steps of the tower, the heat rose with him as if his ascent were from Hell itself.

He had started the stoking at three that afternoon, piling the wood in the mouth of the furnace at Mezzoni's orders. At five he had lit it, forcing air into it with a bellows. He had watched it glow red, then yellow, then white, forcing more wood in to make it burn hotter, then closed the grate and inspected the brickwork. The mortar was holding.

And now he inspected the tubes the fire rose through, up to the boiler. He checked the boiler, its rivets beginning to take on a glow, too, and listened for the hissing of steam as the melting snow on the roof of the church percolated down through it.

He climbed yet higher, now even above the choirmaster's eyrie, up past the venting steam of the main pressure valve, wearing thick gloves as he tested the fittings that governed the whistle-pipes. They too, he realized, were taking on a soft glow, yet he could see that his

work had been sound. Handled with care, the valve chest would hold. The bedplate, positioned above the boiler to fit in the narrow width of the belfry, would remain fixed firmly in its brackets.

The organ would stand its test—it *would* play music. Music louder than any church organ had ever been able to play before.

The elders would be pleased.

He descended to the cramped space of the choir loft and watched as the choirmaster tested his keyboards, running arpeggios softly up and down with one hand only. The choirmaster smiled at him.

"This," Mezzoni said, reaching up with his other hand to the cock that controlled the main valve above him, "is what makes the sound, yes? That is, if I twist it, the organ is louder?"

"Yes," Rushton answered. "And that is the pressure gauge. When you play loud, keep an eye on the needle. Make sure it doesn't go into the red."

The choirmaster nodded. "You've done your work well, Rushton." Reaching up again, he twisted, then with both hands played an opening chord.

The music swelled, nearly deafening Rushton until his ears had a chance to adjust to it. Then it grew soft again as, down below, the church elders

filed in, one by one, the chief of them mounting the steps to the pulpit while the others arrayed themselves in a half-circle in the chancel. Mezzoni played, first simple hymns, then complex ones, adjusting the loudness up and down, sometimes so loud the sound beat down on them, echoing from the roof above like some vast hammer, other times so softly as to be nothing more than a whisper, like the sound of one small bird.

Mezzoni laughed. He looked down toward the floor of the church where the chief elder was beginning his reading, then back up at Rushton, playing soft chords again with only one hand. "I would have saved Reverend Hawkings, you know," he said. "I tried to catch him. But he was too frightened. He backed away from her too quickly."

"Her," Rushton said. He spat the word out as if it were evil. "Even if what you tell me is true, if it hadn't been for her, Reverend Hawkings would not have been killed. The fire at the circus would never have been set." He glared at Mezzoni. "Of course you wouldn't have this organ either, nor would you have had *her*, held like a prisoner by God knows what power you exercise over her."

The choirmaster nodded, then reached in his pocket and pulled

out a key, handing it over to the sexton. "It's time for you to leave me, Rushton—but hear me out first. I told you Hawkings was a coward. He guessed at the truth. But he lacked the courage to follow his reasoning to the end, to find out the *whole* truth. Sophia, yes, is at the base of this, but not in the way you think."

"I'll at least listen," Rushton said. "But I won't promise that I'll believe a word you say to me."

"Don't then," Mezzoni said. Still playing with one hand only, he looked down over the choir loft rail to where the elders were still at their reading. "You didn't attend the circus, Rushton. You only saw a part of that afternoon's parade, and yet you noticed the bareback rider. *They*, however, were at the performance. They were not able to take their eyes from her. They saw her dressed only in tights and spangles, her hair long and unbound. They saw the other men of the town, especially the younger ones, staring as well, and in their pride, they determined that she was too great a temptation."

The choirmaster paused, seeing the chief elder slam shut the Bible he had been reading from, then clear his throat to begin the opening prayer. He reached to the pressure cock, twisting it

clockwise, bringing the music up.

"*They* did it, Rushton. In their arrogance, they set the fire that night, maybe not meaning for people to be killed, but hoping in that way to drive the circus out before their town could be tempted further. And I, in my pride, too, watched them do it. Because I was there, you see, in Sophia's tent. When the fire started. It was I who pulled her out, shrieking, through searing heat as the flames rose around us, saving what few of her belongings I could take with her.

"And then I saw them, their torches still in their hands, firing the wagons as well as the other tents, then starting their proud, complacent walk back to the church and the village. I knew it was them, you see—in the darkness beyond the flames they couldn't see me. They made no attempt to hide their faces. They . . ."

"Wait," Rushton broke in. "You mean that you and she—the bareback rider—were lovers even before then? Before the circus came? That she *invited* you . . ."

Mezzoni held up his hand for silence, then resumed playing, a secular piece now but one that was still sometimes heard at church services. "You fool," he told Rushton. "You still don't understand? I have my pride,



too—pride that caused me to flee New Haven when she left her family to join the circus. I feared the scandal. Then when, by chance, the circus came here and I saw her in the parade, I went to her after the evening performance to beg her to tell no one that she knew me.”

“You mean that you *jilted* her,” Rushton said. “That you *had* been lovers, but then you betrayed her . . .”

The choirmaster shook his head. “Take the key, Rushton. It’s to my music room, where she’s expecting you. Leave the church with her and go to the north, with any of the other townspeople who will go with you—there’s a village beyond the ridge that will take you in. And as for Sophia, remember she’s lost her speech and hearing, but she and I have worked out a language with our hands—you saw us speaking it before—and if you give her time, she’ll teach it to you.”

“I don’t understand you,” Rushton said, shouting now as the choirmaster reached again to the pressure valve, turning it another revolution clockwise. Making the music rise. “Why are you doing this? If you were lovers . . . if you *are* lovers . . . why not go yourself? Why betray her a second time?”

“Go,” the choirmaster shouted back. “No, you do not under-

stand—not yet. That, as I said before, she’s become fond of you, watching you on her nightly excursions. That she and I were never lovers.” He reached to the pressure valve again. “And that I do what I must.”

“But then, who . . .” Rushton began as the choirmaster twisted the pressure all the way up this time, clamping the valve shut. He watched as the needle rose into the red.

“She is my *sister*,” the choirmaster shouted, pushing the sexton onto the tower stairs. “Now run, you idiot—for her sake, if not yours!”

Rushton just nodded, unable to shout back over the music. Blood rushed to his ears as he plunged downward, seeing steam spurt from the joints in the boiler pipes, hearing it hiss as more water flowed in from the roof condensers, building the pressure higher and higher.

He ran through fire and heat, much as Mezzoni must have, it occurred to him, escaping the burning tents and wagons. He ran past mortar that glowed in the dark of the basement passages, finding the door to Mezzoni’s room and wrenching it open, taking Sophia into his arms and up the stairs that led out the side entrance. He called to the townspeople as he ran through the streets, having them run with him up the ridge

to the north, where he suddenly felt himself lifted by an enormous force, thrusting him forward.

The sound came just after. The sound of the organ's last gigantic chord as the church burst apart in a blossom of fire and steam. He felt for Sophia, found she was still next to him, clutching his arm as both of them looked up to see a cloud rise from where the church had been, glowing red and orange, expanding into a vast, horned Death's head that covered the whole town. A head that stared back with the choirmaster's eyes.

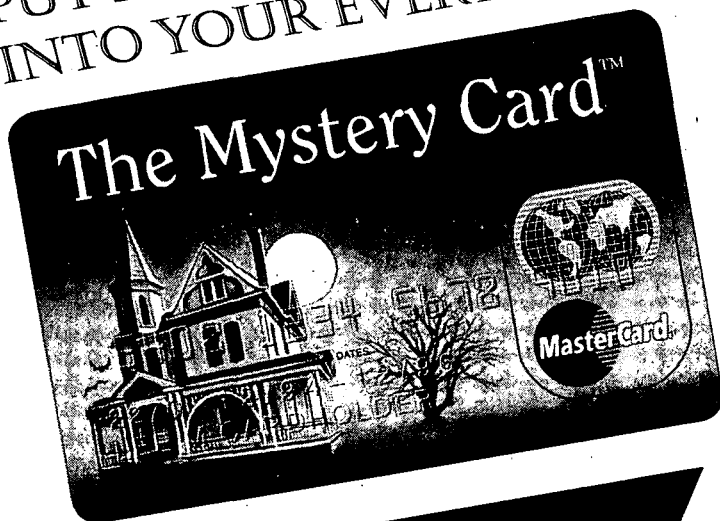
Rushton heard music still as the group straggled across the ridge. Reverberations echoing down from the tops of the mountains—not to God's Heaven, but into the earth below. He thought of that music as he and

Sophia and the others began their descent to the town beyond that would take them in, as Mezzoni had promised.

The snow had come back by then, sifting clean and white over their footsteps, and he and Sophia remained there until spring. During the months her fondness for him grew, just as a fondness in him grew for her as she taught him her language. It grew and it blossomed, and when it was finally time to leave, they went together, traveling north. They followed the mountains up into Vermont where they took up farming, in time taking vows as well of marriage, but only after Rushton had searched and found a small chapel where they preached the Book in the old fashioned manner. Simple and unadorned.

And, most important, where they had no music.

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FICTION

# THE STONE KILLER

Brenda Melton Burnham

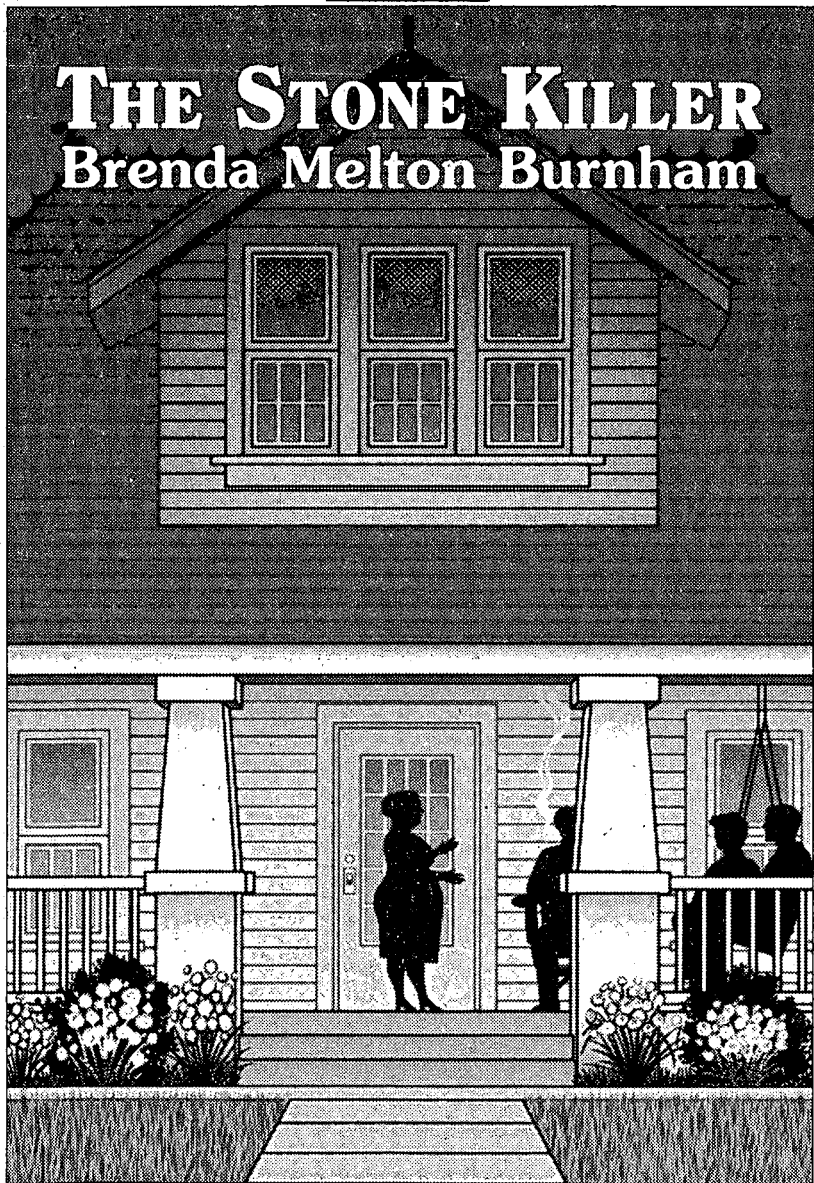


Illustration by Steve Chalker

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/96

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**“I**s there nothing that will rid me of this terrible woman?” I had cried out in frustration—and someone did. And then where did that leave me?

Claretta Stone was the sort of person who went about doing good, even when no one particularly wanted good done. She took energy and efficiency and transformed them into annoyance and aggravation. Her name appeared more times in the social section of the *Golden City Courier* than the president of the United States appeared on the front page.

Golden City is not large enough to avoid all the people you dislike, but I tried to do so with Claretta Stone.

“Did you hear about the battle in the Genealogy Club?” my brother Harry’s wife, Flora, asked. “Ruth Neville and Claretta Stone were both running for president . . .”

I groaned.

“ . . . and Ruth won. But now Claretta is making her tenure just miserable.”

That was easy to imagine.

“I didn’t realize Claretta was interested in genealogy.” My brother Arthur’s wife, Louella, refilled our coffee cups.

“You know Claretta. She only joined the group recently, but once she’s involved with any

thing, she becomes very involved.”

Takes over is more like it.

“I heard that seven people dropped out of the Hospital Auxiliary last year while she was president,” Flora went on. “Edith Freeling said she was literally driving them all to nervous breakdowns.”

“Claretta Stone is a self-centered . . .”

“Oh, Jane, I know she can be tiresome.” Louella offered us more poppy seed cake. “But she does try so very hard.” After World War II Louella’s mother is reported to have said that she thought Hitler had good organizational skills, it’s just a shame he used them in a bad cause, and Louella was following along in her mother’s tradition.

Neither Flora nor I have ever felt strong compunctions about having to say something nice about anyone (Flora has always been one of my best sources of information). Having pretty well covered the Claretta topic, we got back to our purpose for the afternoon, which was early planning for the annual Cavanaugh Family Picnic.

Cavanaughs arrived in what is now Kern County, in southwestern Kansas, nearly one hundred fifty years ago and immediately settled in to flourish and propagate. The first mayor of Golden City was a Cava-

naugh. I am a double Cavanaugh, my parents' having been distant cousins, and I am proud to have inherited their many strengths. Cavanaugh women are hardy and tough; the men are known for their conservative politics, gamesmanship, and financial skills, particularly when others around them are in times of need. Two world wars, a depression, and various droughts improved our holdings tremendously.

The first family picnic was held in the late thirties, when I was still a child. It wasn't until the early seventies that it really caught on, however, and it has now expanded into one of the largest summer festivities around, drawing people from everywhere, Cavanaugh or not.

The preceding conversation took place in mid-January. I thought no more of Claretta Stone until she cornered me in the dairy section of the Piggly Wiggly Market in early February. A short round woman with a bosom that protruded far beyond normal expectations, she was still impossible to outrun. But were I not lame in one leg, I might've tried.

"Jane Cavanaugh! Just the woman I want to see. How are you? Can you believe this weather?"

"What did you want to see me about, Claretta?"

"Oh, Jane. You always have to get right to the point of things, don't you?"

I waited, silent, for her laughter to trill itself out.

She leaned in closer and lowered her voice only slightly. "I hear you're in charge of the planning for the Annual Picnic this year—" she smiled at me sweetly "—and I wanted to offer my services."

While, as I've mentioned, the picnic has opened up into a local holiday of sorts, no one but Cavanaughs has ever been involved in the planning.

"After all, my husband is *the* top soft drink distributor in the county . . ." her chest rose three inches with this announcement " . . . and I have excellent organizational skills, if I do say so myself."

"We have relied on Norm's fine services in the past, and I see no reason for that to change." Norm Stone was an innocuous little man whose primary interest in life seemed to be the collecting of travel brochures. "As to the planning committee . . ."

"Have you ever considered joining the Genealogy Club?" Claretta could have sensed my forthcoming rejection and chosen to deflect it. On the other hand, she talked constantly, so it was not uncommon for her to change subjects rapidly as well



as interrupt anyone else who might be speaking. "You really should, Jane. I know how aware you are of the Cavanaugh family and its history."

"I don't . . ."

"You know, I just joined last year, and it's fascinating what I've been able to learn already. Naturally I researched my parents, the Grommers, and you'll never guess what." Once again she pressed her ample bosom in my direction and dropped her voice to a deep stage whisper. "I was adopted!"

"Really?" My heart went out to the poor Grommers, both dead now, who hadn't a clue what they were getting all those years ago.

"So of course my next step was to check out the mystery of my real parents."

"Of course."

"I haven't locked anything down for certain yet, but I think soon I will have really exciting news!"

"How lovely for you. Gracious, I must be going . . ."

"Oh yes. Me too. Meetings to go to, you know, and things to do."

She toodle-ooed, and I staggered off to finish my shopping.

**"D**id you hear that Claretta Stone was an orphan?" Flora exclaimed at dinner the following Sunday.

"She was in her thirties when Mabel Grommer died," my brother Harry said, with a confused look on his face. "And Wilbur only died two years ago."

"Claretta was abandoned as an infant," Louella explained, "and the Grommers took her in."

"Oh," Harry said.

"She's down at the courthouse two and three times a week." My brother Arthur, a county judge, took another helping of mashed potatoes. "She reminds me a lot of you, Jane."

I set my glass down with a thump. "In what way?"

His grip on the gravy bowl slipped slightly. "Well, you know, once she sinks her teeth into something, she never lets go."

"Claretta Stone is a nitwit."

"Yes, of course," Arthur agreed. "But she sure is a stubborn one."

I ran into Ruth Neville at the library. Always a somewhat muddled person, today her hair looked desperately in need of a new perm, and her cardigan was buttoned halfway up on the wrong buttons.

"Jane, how are you? So good to see you. I was just looking for my purse. I seem to have laid it down somewhere . . ."

I helped her find her purse,



picked up the books she had dropped in the process, and congratulated her on her election.

"Oh, you mean the Genealogy Club? Thank you. Some people aren't too happy about it."

"From what I've heard, you earned the position. You've worked long and hard and done your fair share."

"I'm not the most clever person in the world, you know. I'm forever forgetting things. Perhaps a more efficient person would do a better job . . ."

"Nonsense."

"Do you really think so, Jane? How kind of you."

Edith Freeling was standing next to me at the prescription counter in Sewell's Drugstore when Claretta's adoptive status cropped up in conversation.

"I think she was tossed out of a car that was passing through at the time," Edith said, "and fell on her head. You've no idea what that woman is like, Jane, until you've served on a board with her. It's like facing a speeding locomotive. She simply steams through everything and everyone. Every time I see her I want to beat her to a pulp."

"All right if I mulch your roses on Friday, ma'am?" Scrapper said that afternoon. He lives in my Aunt Lottie's garage and

tends to our yards. "Miz Stone wants me to put a walkway around her flowerbed."

"I didn't know you were working for her."

"Wasn't. She come over to Miz Lottie's particular, jes' to ask me." When I didn't say anything he remarked, "It bothers you, me workin' for her?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You can work for anyone you choose, I'm sure. You're a grown man."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just make sure she pays you what you're worth."

"Yes, ma'am."

It was one of those rare days that March seems capable of every year, when the crocus and daffodils are blooming and the sun is shining and the air promises spring. Arthur and I were sitting on the old swing on my front porch; Harry sat in my mother's wicker rocker, smoking one of his beloved cigars. Periodically, when Flora fusses long enough, he tries to quit. During those periods he chews on toothpicks, then breaks them in half and leaves them littered about as evidence of his sacrifice. This last time he had lasted nearly six weeks.

We talked of the family picnic, which led us back to the years when we were children. Scrapper worked in the flower-

beds below the railing, listening to our reminiscences.

I heard the car pull into the driveway, but it wasn't until Claretta was approaching that I realized who had arrived.

"Hello, everybody," she spouted, smile plastered across her face as always. "Isn't this wonderful weather? Your flowers are looking gorgeous, Jane."

We mumbled greetings. Arthur got up to offer his chair, but she said no, she wasn't staying. "I just dropped by to give you my wonderful news. You know I've been trying to track down my real parents? You have no idea how terribly casual people were about birth certificates and such during the thirties. It's amazing. I suppose with the Depression, and the drought, and people moving about from one place to another. Still I do hate inefficiency, don't you? If a thing should be done a certain way, then do it that way, that's my motto."

"You were saying . . . about your birth certificate . . ." I prompted, when she threatened to go on at great length about slackers and the work ethic.

"Oh yes. I've learned that my mother's name was Eula Givens and that she worked as a waitress at the White Front Cafe in 1936!"

For the life of me I couldn't imagine why discovering your

mother was a waitress would put such a note of triumph in your voice, but Claretta went on: "And she was having a, a relationship," dramatic pause, "with a Cavanaugh!"

Arthur and Harry and I stared at her. I could hear the *snick, snick* of the clippers as Scrapper tended to my oleander bushes. Claretta cocked her head and, in her best teasing manner, added, "Don't you want to know which Cavanaugh?"

"I don't think . . ." Harry stammered.

"I'm sure . . ." Arthur murmured.

"I can't imagine why you think we would be interested in cheap gossip, Claretta," I said.

She looked at me. "Not even if it was your stepfather?" She turned her gaze upon my brothers. "Or your father?"

Everyone in Kern County knows the story of how my father hanged himself in October of '29, just two days before I was born, and how my mother (after an appropriate mourning period, of course) married his younger brother and eventually gave birth to my three brothers. They know that my older sister, Irene, died in the playhouse fire that left me with a scarred and crippled leg, and that my brother Vincent died in Korea.

Arthur and Harry sat in

stunned silence. Before I could open my mouth to speak, Claretta continued. "Just think. This year I can go to the annual picnic as a true Cavanaugh." She laughed and turned to go back to her car. "I'll be talking to you. I just wanted to give you the good news first. I'm going to announce it next week at the Genealogy Club meeting."

She disappeared from sight, and a few moments later, I heard the car engine start. It backed out of my driveway, Claretta waved and was gone.

"Do you think it's true?" Harry said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I can't imagine Father . . . doing something like that . . ." Arthur struggled, "with a . . . waitress."

"Of course he didn't," I declared. "It's all nonsense. No one would believe a thing like that."

We sat. The chains supporting the porch swing squealed softly when Arthur shifted his position. When I could bear it no longer, I stood and cried out in frustration, "Is there nothing that will rid me of this terrible woman?"

**T**hree days later Claretta Stone disappeared. Flora reported that Norm had come home from work and, not finding her

in the house, eventually worked his way out to their potting shed. There he discovered seedling plants, mulch, and broken bits of clay pots strewn across the workbench and hard-packed dirt floor.

He called the police, naturally. With evidence indicating signs of a possible struggle, a missing persons report was filed.

"I called Merrilee immediately and told her to double-check every night and make sure her doors are locked," Louella said. "With a rapist on the loose, one can't be too careful."

"There was no evidence of rape." Although there's no accounting for some people's tastes, I had real trouble envisioning any rapist who would go after Claretta Stone, and my niece Merrilee is as round and soft and pasty pale as a bowl of tapioca pudding. Appealing, perhaps, if one likes pudding, but hardly attractive in a woman.

"It needn't have happened there. He could've taken her anywhere. Men's appetites being what they are . . ." Louella shuddered and her eyelids flickered rapidly.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a kidnapping for ransom," Flora interjected.

"I didn't think they had that much money."

"Of course they don't have a lot, but Claretta did inherit the hardware store when Wilbur died, and while the business itself might not have been worth all that much, the building was in a most desirable location. Now that it's sold they should have a nice windfall."

"Perhaps she ran off with another man," I suggested although I didn't believe it for an instant. Claretta Stone was not about to leave when she was on the verge of proving herself a Cavanaugh.

The trouble was that, hard as I tried, I could not totally discount the possibility that my stepfather had dallied, however briefly, with a waitress. Even the finest of men have their failings, as my dear mother used to say. While my first reaction to the news of Claretta's disappearance had been one of extreme relief, as the days passed I found the relief giving way to disquiet.

The police received phone calls and tips that led to nothing. Rumor, speculation, and fear rippled through the local population. Golden City and Kern County have their problems, but the disappearance of a respectable middle-aged housewife is not a common occurrence.

Five days went by. The weather, as was typical in March,

turned cold once more, and harsh winds blew in from the west. While people huddled inside, watching the early blossoms wither, the next shocker arrived: lab tests had been done on a glass found lying on its side beneath the workbench. The single set of fingerprints belonged to Claretta, but residue in the glass showed heavy traces of arsenic.

A search was immediately organized, and within hours her body was discovered.

"In the mulch box!" Ruth Neville's hands shook and her teeth chewed at her upper lip. "It's just too awful for words."

"I suppose that means suicide is out," Edith Freeling said, her voice raw from too many cigarettes.

"Who would do a thing like that?" Louella exclaimed, to which I wanted to respond, "anybody who knew her."

But I didn't.

I had little to say to anyone. I stayed at home the next few days and thought, long and hard, about Claretta Stone and the manner of her demise.

Sitting heavily on my shoulders was the recollection of that afternoon encounter on the front porch, and my impassioned outburst. I am not normally given to self-indulgent behavior. While it disturbed me to recall my remark, I had no in-

tention of carrying it any further with breast-beating and displays of shame. Still . . .

Make no mistake—Cava-naughs are proud. Harry and Arthur stood to lose as much face as I by Claretta's flaunting—and flaunt it she would—of her disreputable pedigree. Furthermore, they would be well aware of the embarrassment for their wives and grown children.

I had not killed Claretta Stone. Hadn't even considered the possibility. But had Harry? Or Arthur? Or Scrapper?

To my knowledge Scrapper had no stake in the outcome except for two small details: one, he is loyal to my family, and two, he, like myself, has no strong barrier against ridding himself, or us, of what he perceives to be a threat. While he could be viewed by many as intellectually limited and emotionally dysfunctional, our country had considered him fit enough to serve in Vietnam, and I have long since overcome my early doubts about him.

That Sunday it was my turn to host the family dinner. The topic of Claretta Stone's murder came up almost immediately.

"Poor Norm is devastated," Flora announced.

"He collapsed that first night," Louella added. "Doc Gorman had to come in and se-

date him. Can you imagine how much worse it is for him now, with the discovery of the body right there in their back yard?"

"Perhaps we ought to talk of other things," Arthur suggested, his fingers fussing with his collar, his mustache, his earlobe. His color was high; Louella whispered to me in the kitchen that his blood pressure was soaring.

Harry, after masticating three toothpicks in a valiant effort at self-denial, excused himself to go outside for a cigar.

"Arthur's right," I agreed. "Such talk isn't good for one's digestion."

After that we seemed to have little to say to one another, and everyone went home right after dessert.

Scrapper arrived early the next morning to start some repairs on the gazebo in the back orchard. March, having proved it still had winter within its reach, now relented and returned once more to calm sunshine. Around ten o'clock I made my way down the path with hot coffee and banana bread fresh from the oven.

"Time for a break," I suggested.

He put his tools down willingly and came to the top of the steps.

"Come up and sit down."

"I'm fine here, ma'am." Scrap-

per was uncomfortable sitting in chairs or being in people's homes. He preferred to be outside, standing or squatting or slouching against something.

"I think we need to talk."

He bit into his bread, chewed, and waited.

"I know what you did."

He blew on his coffee and took a sip.

"I'm talking about Claretta Stone."

He set his cup down carefully on the floor of the gazebo.

"You buried her body in the mulch bin, didn't you? It would take a bit of strength to do that . . . it's beyond the capability of most women, I'd guess."

Scrapper pursed his lips and glanced around the orchard, this way and that, before turning his gaze to me. "You reckon I killed her?"

I shook my head. "I think you could have. I just don't think you did."

He shifted his position against the railing. "She was lying there on the ground, her clothes all untidy and the new little plants and ever'thin' all broken around her. I couldn't leave her like that."

"Why not?"

This time he took even longer before responding. "I jes' couldn't, tha's all."

"You thought I might've killed her?"

He shrugged. He didn't mention Harry or Arthur, and neither did I.

As if it were a day for sharing confidences, that afternoon I had a visitor. Arthur looked so unwell I was immediately concerned, but he shook off my exclamations and said, simply, "I have to talk to you, Jane."

We went into the kitchen. He waited until I had poured coffee for us and put the rest of the loaf of banana bread on the table.

"I've been half crazy this past week. I don't know what to do." He swallowed as if there were a blockage at the back of his throat. "I, I was at the Stones' that day."

I sat very still.

"I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said to us that day on the porch, remember?" I nodded. "And how she was going to say . . . unpleasant things about Father, and I . . . I really had no idea how I could convince her not to do that, but I knew I had to try. Do you understand?"

I nodded again.

"I went up to the door and knocked, but no one answered. I don't know why, I guess because the weather was nice, I decided to take a look out back. I sort of wandered around for a while, I think, looking at their yard and all . . . not really want-

ing to face her, but knowing I had to, if you know what I mean. Finally I took a look in the potting shed. No reason really. I just did."

His hands flexed convulsively. "She was lying there on the ground, Jane. Dead. It was horrible. Horrible. She was dead when I saw her. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, Arthur. I do."

"And lying right beside her, I found this." He reached in his jacket pocket, took his hand out, and held it open for me to see. A chewed toothpick, broken in half.

**T**uesday morning I got all my chores done, then bathed and dressed to go out. I put some necessities into the new cloth bag I'd recently purchased, removed the loaves of foil-wrapped banana bread from the freezer, and set off to make calls.

Ruth Neville took a long time to answer her door. Always a disheveled woman, she now appeared unkempt, almost slovenly. Foodstains marked the front of her faded print blouse and her hair flew in all directions. Lipstick bled outward from her mouth like a spreading blue-red blot.

"I'm sorry," I said, and almost meant it. "I should've called first."

"No, no. It's all right. Come in."

Her house showed the marks of her deterioration. Dust and glass rings marred the surface of the lovely old Victorian side tables, and the carpet badly needed vacuuming. We sat across from each other after she had accepted my offering of bread ("How nice of you. I haven't baked in weeks.").

"Have you heard anything new," she asked immediately, "about Claretta?"

"I guess the police are questioning everyone. None of the neighbors appears to have seen anything unusual."

She started to speak, then put her head in her hands and began sobbing. "Oh, Jane. I am guilty of a terrible sin."

I went to her kitchen and came back with a glass of water. When I touched her shoulder she jerked, nearly knocking the glass from my hand.

"What is your 'terrible sin,' Ruth?"

She swallowed and choked and calmed herself somewhat. "I, I—oh lord, I prayed for her to die." The sobs began again.

"Praying for someone to die is hardly a chargeable crime. The question is did you act on it?"

"What shall I do?" She rocked back and forth in her chair like a small child. "What shall I do?"

It took the greater part of an



hour to get Ruth somewhat calmed and to establish that her guilt sprang from a terribly human desire to rid herself of Claretta Stone, but nothing more. After suggesting that she consult her clergyman for assistance, I took my leave.

Guilt can spring from any number of sources, I suppose. I have always considered myself fortunate that I do not suffer from this cumbersome tendency.

Since the Stones' house was nearby and I hadn't made my condolence call yet (it's difficult sympathizing over the loss of someone you can't stand), I decided to stop there next.

Set back from the street and fronted with shrubbery, their house was fairly protected from neighborly view. No wonder witnesses hadn't come forward regarding what visitors Claretta had had that final day. As I went up the walk, I could hear the sound of a small engine coming from the back yard, so I didn't bother to stop at the front door.

The path alongside the house was narrow, with tall arborvitae bushes along one side. I rounded the back corner and had a full view of the yard.

In the center, about twenty feet ahead of me, a gas-powered shredder sat, its motor chugging away. Beside it Norm

Stone bent over the recumbent form of a man.

I approached them as quickly as I could. When Norm raised the lead pipe gripped in his right hand, preparing to strike the fallen man again, I called out, "Norm! Norm!"

"Jane Cavanaugh?" He paused and looked up at me as if he were having trouble focusing.

Encountering two normally mild-mannered people in one day both suddenly out of control was upsetting, to say the least. "What are you doing?" I demanded.

"You'd best stay back," he gasped. "I've got Claretta's killer, the filthy scum!"

As he raised himself, continuing to keep one hand firmly on the other man's shoulder blade, I could see the bloody gashes on the back of the man's neck. "No, Norm," I said, carefully choosing my words. "This man didn't harm your wife."

Norm's breath came in ragged little jerks. His eyes darted from me to his victim. He lifted the pipe.

"You want to know what I think, Norm?" I raised my voice slightly. "I think you killed her, that's what I think." I could see his chest heaving, smell the sweat from his exertion, from his fear. "I stopped by Carter's Travel Agency this

morning. They told me about the trip to Australia."

He stood very still.

"I think you went home that day to tell her about it. She was working in the potting shed, wasn't she? And she said no, she had no intention of going anywhere. Such a cruel thing, really. So you just reached up to the old sack of weed killer on the shelf and dumped a handful of it in her glass when she wasn't looking."

The man on the ground moaned and stirred slightly.

"What a dreadful shock it must've been when you came home that night," I went on quickly, "and she wasn't there. No Claretta, alive or dead. What horrors you had to have gone through."

For just a moment I thought I had him. Then his arm stiffened. "Filthy nigger! Laid his hands on my wife!" he shouted as the pipe started its descent.

I fired my mother's lovely little pearl-handled .25 caliber automatic directly from its hiding place, shooting a hole right through the bottom of my new cloth bag.

"A lucky shot, Miss Cavanaugh," Chief of Police Wilkerson said.

"A lucky thing Scrapper has a hard head," I replied.

"Yep," Chief Wilkerson agreed. "Doc says he'll be out of the hospital soon." He shook his head. "I still can't believe ole Norm poisoned his wife. He'd been boring people to death for years with his talk of goin' here or goin' there. Reckon nobody realized how much it meant to him."

"Not even Claretta. And it was the death of her."

"He told you that, right?"

"He said Claretta would have no part of spending her inheritance on a trip," I said, "just before he started to strike Scrapper again. And I couldn't allow him to do that."

"No, ma'am, you purely couldn't. You had no choice, and that's a fact."

"Scrapper ought to be very grateful for what you did for him," Harry said after the police chief left.

"He's not the only one." Harry didn't ask and I didn't say more. I was quite sure in my own mind that Norm Stone had dropped the broken toothpick on the ground when he added the arsenic to his wife's drink. He wouldn't have been aware that Harry had returned to his cigars. And I had no doubt that Claretta would never have agreed to take a trip before her triumphant appearance at the annual picnic.

Foolish woman to have

pushed her dreamer of a husband past his limit. Foolish man to think he could frame a

Cavanaugh, or harm one of their own. I have always been an excellent shot.

### **SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

Baron Austen of Jayhawken cheated on the first income tax by ten gold crowns, as discovered by wise King Herkimer.

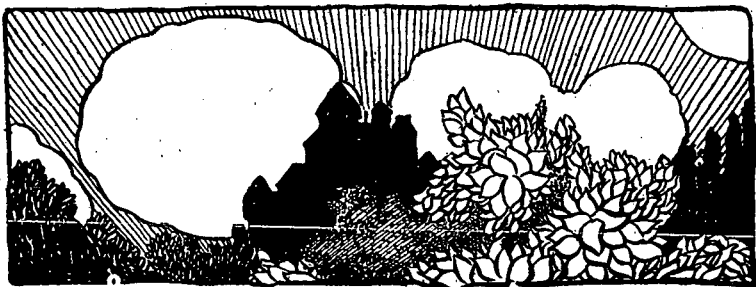
BARON	BARONY	PRODUCT	PEASANTS	FROM EACH
Austen	Jayhawken	fish	70	80
Baylor	Holichester	grain	90	50
Cryder	Glorifield	tin	60	60
Desman	Fairmaples	timber	50	90
Everly	Inglewood	wool	80	70

BARON	PROFIT	NET INCOME	TAX	TAX DECLARED
Austen	5600	4900	490	480
Baylor	4500	3600	360	360
Cryder	3600	3000	300	300
Desman	4500	4000	400	400
Everly	5600	4800	480	480
			2030	2020

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# THE SECOND DEATH



**Graham Greene**



**S**he found me in the evening under the trees that grew outside the village. I had never cared for her and would have hidden myself if I'd seen her coming. She was to blame, I'm certain, for her son's vices. If they were vices, but I'm very far from admitting that they were. At any rate he was generous, never mean, like others in the village I could mention if I chose.

I was staring hard at a leaf or she would never have found me. It was dangling from the twig, its stalk torn across by the wind or else by a stone one of the village children had flung. Only the green tough skin of the stalk held it there suspended. I was watching closely because a caterpillar was crawling across the surface making the leaf sway to and fro. The caterpillar was aiming at the twig, and I wondered whether it would reach it in safety or whether the leaf would fall with it into the water. There was a pool underneath the trees, and the water always appeared red because of the heavy clay in the soil.

I never knew whether the caterpillar reached the twig, for, as I've said, the wretched woman found me. The first I knew of her coming was her voice just behind my ear.

"I've been looking in all the pubs for you," she said in her old shrill voice. It was typical of her to say "all the pubs" when there were only two in the place. She always wanted credit for the trouble she hadn't really taken.

I was annoyed and I couldn't help speaking a little harshly. "You might have saved yourself the trouble," I said, "you should have known I wouldn't be in a pub on a fine night like this."

The old vixen became quite humble. She was always smooth enough when she wanted anything. "It's for my poor son," she said. That meant that he was ill. When he was well I never heard her say anything better than "that dratted boy." She'd make him be in the house by midnight every day of the week, as if there were any serious mischief a man could get up to in a little village like ours. Of course we soon found a way to cheat her, but it was the principle of the thing I objected to—a grown man of over thirty ordered about by his mother, just because she hadn't a husband to control. But when he was ill, though it might be with only a small chill, it was "my poor son."

"He's dying," she said, "and God knows what I shall do without him."

"Well, I don't see how I can help you," I said. I was angry because he'd been dying once before and she'd done everything but actually bury him. I imagined it was the same sort of dying this time, the sort a man gets over. I'd seen him about the week before on his way up the hill to see the big-breasted girl at the farm. I'd watched him till he was like a little black dot, which stayed suddenly by a square box in a field. That was the barn where they used to meet. I have very good eyes, and it amuses me to try how far and how clearly they can see. I met him again some time after midnight and helped him get into the house without his mother knowing, and he was well enough then—only a little sleepy and tired.

The old vixen was at it again. "He's been asking for you," she shrilled at me.

"If he's as ill as you make out," I said, "it would be better for him to ask for a doctor."

"Doctor's there, but he can't do anything." That startled me for a moment, I'll admit it, until I thought, the old devil's malingering. He's got some plan or other. He was quite clever enough to cheat a doctor. I had seen him throw a fit that would have deceived Moses.

"For God's sake, come," she said, "he seems frightened." Her voice broke quite genuinely, for I suppose in her way she was fond of him. I couldn't help pitying her a little, for I knew that he had never cared a mite for her and had never troubled to disguise the fact.

I left the trees and the red pool and the struggling caterpillar, for I knew that she would never leave me alone, now that her "poor boy" was asking for me. Yet a week ago there was nothing she wouldn't have done to keep us apart. She thought me responsible for his ways, as though any mortal man could have kept him off a likely woman when his appetite was up.

I think it must have been the first time I had entered their cottage by the front door since I came to the village ten years ago. I threw an amused glance at his window. I thought I could see the marks on the wall of the ladder we'd used the week before. We'd had a little difficulty in putting it straight, but his mother slept sound. He had brought the ladder down from the barn, and when he'd got safely in, I carried it up there again. But you could never trust his word. He'd lie to his best friend, and when I reached the barn, I found the girl had gone. If he couldn't bribe you with his mother's money, he'd bribe you with other people's promises.

I began to feel uneasy directly I got inside the door. It was natural that the house should be quiet, for the pair of them never had

any friends to stay, although the old woman had a sister-in-law living only a few miles away. But I didn't like the sound of the doctor's feet as he came downstairs to meet us. He'd twisted his face into a pious solemnity for our benefit as though there was something holy about death, even about the death of my friend.

"He's conscious," he said, "but he's going. There's nothing I can do. If you want him to die in peace, better let his friend go along up. He's frightened about something."

The doctor was right. I could tell that as soon as I bent under the lintel and entered my friend's room. He was propped up on a pillow, and his eyes were on the door, waiting for me to come. They were very bright and frightened, and his hair lay across his forehead in sticky stripes. I'd never realized before what an ugly fellow he was. He had got sly eyes that looked at you too much out of the corners, but when he was in ordinary health, they held a twinkle that made you forget the slyness. There was something pleasant and brazen in the twinkle, as much as to say, "I know I'm sly and ugly. But what does that matter? I've got guts." It was that twinkle, I think, some women found attractive and stimulating. Now when the twinkle was gone, he looked a rogue and nothing else.

I thought it my duty to cheer him up, so I made a small joke out of the fact that he was alone in bed. He didn't seem to relish it, and I was beginning to fear that he, too, was taking a religious view of his death, when he told me to sit down, speaking quite sharply.

"I'm dying," he said, talking very fast, "and I want to ask you something. That doctor's no good—he'd think me delirious. I'm frightened, old man. I want to be reassured," and then after a long pause, "someone with common sense." He slipped a little farther down in his bed.

"I've only once been badly ill before," he said. "That was before you settled here. I wasn't much more than a boy. People tell me that I was even supposed to be dead. They were carrying me out to burial when a doctor stopped them just in time."

I'd heard plenty of cases like that, and I saw no reason why he should want to tell me about it. And then I thought I saw his point. His mother had not been too anxious once before to see if he were properly dead, though I had little doubt that she made a great show of grief—"My poor boy. I don't know what I shall do without him." And I'm certain that she believed herself then as she believed herself now. She wasn't a murderess. She was only inclined to be premature.



"Look here, old man," I said, and I propped him a little higher on his pillow, "you needn't be frightened. You aren't going to die, and anyway I'd see that the doctor cut a vein or something before they moved you. But that's all morbid stuff. Why, I'd stake my shirt that you've got plenty more years in front of you. And plenty more girls, too," I added to make him smile.

"Can't you cut out all that?" he said, and I knew then that he had turned religious. "Why," he said, "if I lived, I wouldn't touch another girl. I wouldn't, not one."

I tried not to smile at that, but it wasn't easy to keep a straight face. There's always something a bit funny about a sick man's morals. "Anyway," I said, "you needn't be frightened."

"It's not that," he said. "Old man, when I came round that other time, I thought that I'd been dead. It wasn't like sleep at all. Or rest in peace. There was someone there all round me who knew everything. Every girl I'd ever had. Even that young one who hadn't understood. It was before your time. She lived a mile down the road, where Rachel lives now, but she and her family went away afterwards. Even the money I'd taken from Mother. I don't call that stealing. It's in the family. I never had a chance to explain. Even the thoughts I'd had. A man can't help his thoughts."

"A nightmare," I said.

"Yes, it must have been a dream, mustn't it? The sort of dream people do get when they are ill. And I saw what was coming to me, too. I can't bear being hurt. It wasn't fair. And I wanted to faint and I couldn't because I was dead."

"In the dream," I said. His fear made me nervous. "In the dream," I said again.

"Yes, it must have been a dream—mustn't it?—because I woke up. The curious thing was I felt quite well and strong. I got up and stood in the road, and a little farther down, kicking up the dust, was a small crowd going off with a man—the doctor who had stopped them burying me."

"Well?" I said.

"Old man," he said, "suppose it was true. Suppose I had been dead. I believed it then, you know, and so did my mother. But you can't trust her. I went straight for a couple of years. I thought it might be a sort of second chance. Then things got fogged and somehow . . . It didn't seem really possible. It's not possible. Of course it's not possible. You know it isn't, don't you?"

"Why, no," I said. "Miracles of that sort don't happen nowadays."

And anyway, they aren't likely to happen to you, are they? And here of all places under the sun."

"It would be so dreadful," he said, "if it had been true, and I'd got to go through all that again. You don't know what things were going to happen to me in that dream. And they'd be worse now." He stopped, and then, after a moment, he added as though he were stating a fact: "When one's dead, there's no unconsciousness any more forever."

"Of course it was a dream," I said, and squeezed his hand. He was frightening me with his fancies. I wished that he'd die quickly so that I could get away from his sly, bloodshot, and terrified eyes and see something cheerful and amusing, like the Rachel he had mentioned who lived a mile down the road.

"Why," I said, "if there had been a man about working miracles like that, we should have heard of others, you may be sure. Even poked away in this Godforsaken spot," I said.

"There were some others," he said. "But the stories only went round among the poor, and they'll believe anything, won't they? There were lots of diseased and crippled they said he'd cured. And there was a man who'd been born blind, and he came and just touched his eyelids and sight came to him. Those were all old wives' tales, weren't they?" he asked me, stammering with fear, and then lying suddenly still and bunched up at the side of the bed.

I began to say, "Of course, they were all lies," but I stopped because there was no need. All I could do was to go downstairs and tell his mother to come up and close his eyes. I wouldn't have touched them for all the money in the world. It was a long time since I thought of that day, ages and ages ago, when I felt a cold touch like spittle on my lids and opening my eyes had seen a man like a tree surrounded by other trees walking away.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**J**ames D. Doss's first novel, **The Shaman Sings** (Avon, \$4.99), will please readers who are drawn to Tony Hillerman's books by the Southwestern settings and plots teeming with Native American lore and spirituality. Scott Parris is police chief of a small town in Colorado. He fled the Chicago force in search of the peace and quiet he has had for three years. Until now. An aged and wise woman, a Ute shaman named Daisy Perika, is visited by the howling Coyote, an ominous messenger of impending evil. Then a young female graduate student is viciously murdered. Parris is engaging as he investigates the homicide; his spiritual counterpart Daisy is mesmerizing as she seeks to understand a mystery that's equally dark. Together they find the answers in an original and compelling debut that will leave readers hungry for Doss's next book.

Food and mysteries? An unbeatable combination for readers, and several authors are merrily writing to satisfy our appetites. One of the best known is Diane Mott Davidson, who brings back Colorado caterer Goldy Schulz for her fourth appearance on Davidson's menu. When **Killer Pancake** (Bantam, \$19.95) opens, Goldy is cursing herself for having agreed to cater a local cosmetic company's big sales kickoff bash. Horror of horrors: these pencil-thin saleswomen will let Goldy serve only low-fat food. When a killer crashes the party, Goldy once again has to trade in her chef's hat for her deerstalker's cap. The book is full of snappy repartee, mouth-watering recipes, and a behind-the-scenes peek at a big department store. These mysteries are souffles, perfect for readers in search of frothy fun.

Lovers of Anne Perry's Victorian novels will appreciate the debut of heroine Kathryn Ardleigh in **Death at Gallows Green** (Avon,

\$4.99) by Robin Paige. Kate is an independent, single young American. She is also the pseudonymous author of many of the penny thrillers popular in her day. A sudden inheritance and the legacy of a country house finds Kate living abroad in rural England, where she meets a surprising fellow houseguest one weekend: the then-unknown Beatrix Potter. Peter Rabbit is just a twinkle in his creator's eye, but the murder of a local constable puts another kind of twinkle in Kate's. Accompanied by an amateur scientist, the brilliant and attractive Sir Charles, Kate sets out to catch a killer. While Anne Perry brilliantly explores the psychology of the period, subtly exposing its social ills, Paige's first novel promises a series that will explore instead the romance and charm of Victorian England.

Ridley Pearson has penned another sophisticated, edgy thriller that grabs the reader's attention and simply refuses to let go. Before the novel opens, Hartford police lieutenant Joe "Dart" Dartelli has ignored a piece of evidence in the case of an apparent suicide. He suspected murder, but he also suspected that the victim was a vicious serial killer and rapist. If Dart had followed his gut instinct, eventually he would have been pointing the finger at a friend. Now there's another death, and Dart's earlier omission boomerangs. No one will believe that a serial killer may be on the loose. Worse, in three years Dart's feelings haven't changed one whit toward either his former mentor or the woman-abusing men who are beginning to die off. Paced like a Thomas Harris novel and filled with the forensic detail that draws readers to the novels of Patricia Cornwell, **Chain of Evidence** (Hyperion, \$10.95) is devised as a duel between a student and his master. The question is, can Dart beat this killer at the crime-scene game?

**The Boy's Tale** (Berkley, \$4.99) is the fifth entry by Margaret Frazer in a solid series starring a medieval nun, the intelligent and devout Sister Frevisse, Geoffrey Chaucer's great-niece and amateur sleuth extraordinaire. Although Frazer's series pays homage to Ellis Peters' popular Brother Cadfael novels, these books are sturdy enough to stand on their own. In this latest tale, a small entourage including two children is chased into the St. Frideswide Convent after fleeing from a gang of highwaymen. When Frevisse learns that the boys are half brothers to young Henry VI, king of England, she agrees to afford them sanctuary. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Frevisse may also be sheltering a hired killer. Frazer's novels are filled with period detail—dress, customs, and the often un-

easy truce between Church and State—but it is the estimable Sister Frevisse herself who breathes life into these medieval mysteries.

If you love the dark and richly psychological tapestries woven by P. D. James, you must pick up Ruth Rendell's latest Inspector Wexford novel, **Simisola** (Crown, \$23). In contrast to many of Rendell's nonseries books, as well as the ironic, twisty novels written under the name Barbara Vine, Rendell's Wexford books neatly fill the bill of conventional British police procedurals. Then they go one better. This time Wexford is investigating two murders and a missing person case that have one thing in common: all three involve a black female. Race has never been an issue in the quiet British town of Kingsmarkham; there are very few non-white residents. That is changing, as will Wexford's own opinions about race relations in his hometown. Rendell is a scrupulous writer with intelligence and integrity, an eagle eye for character and detail, and a dazzling command of her intricate plot. *Simisola* deserves a huge audience.

In one of Patricia Cornwell's earlier books Richmond's chief medical examiner and FBI consultant, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, was instrumental in apprehending a dangerous psychotic named Temple Brooks Gault. Unfortunately, Gault proved as cunning as he was deadly: he has escaped from prison. Cornwell's sixth novel, **From Potter's Field** (Scribner, \$24), opens at the scene of a vicious crime in Manhattan's Central Park. Along with two old friends and colleagues, Scarpetta recognizes Gault's handiwork; they also learn that Gault can move freely and unobserved in New York's subway tunnels. Meanwhile, Kay's young niece Lucy, a brilliant hacker and FBI trainee, has also been victimized. Kay cannot shake the belief that Gault has engineered Lucy's predicament as yet another way of getting to the object of his obsession: Kay herself. A showdown seems inevitable, and Cornwell doesn't disappoint.

As Nancy Pickard's **Twilight** (Pocket, \$22) opens, Jenny Cain is eager for her small New England town's first annual Halloween festival, an event sponsored by her brand-new nonprofit foundation. But there are problems. A religious fundamentalist who is protesting the Halloween celebration is killed. A young widow pleads for help in closing a local hiking trail that claimed her husband at its intersection with a highway, and a militant group of nature lovers swarms on the town to fight her. A teenager whom Jenny's husband Geoff has informally adopted is beaten up. And if the insurance rider doesn't come through, the city council will cancel

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the festival. In the past decade Jenny has starred in a book a year, and I've watched her grow up. I liked her then as a feisty and funny single gal in her hometown, establishing a career in civic philanthropy, making amends for her family's sins, squabbling with her stuffy sister, and brilliantly sleuthing. Jenny has matured, and the novels now explore themes of family and society and, in this latest mystery, local developers versus ecoterrorists. Like good wine, Jenny gets better and better.

In **Come to Grief** (Pocket, \$22), bestselling British thriller author Dick Francis brings back former jockey turned private investigator Sid Halley. Francis fans have every reason to break out the champagne: this book is ahead by a lot more than a nose. Someone has been stalking and mutilating horses in their paddocks. One of the first victims was a pony owned by a young girl battling leukemia; the loss of her beloved pet has left Rachel haunted by nightmares. The distraught mother hires Sid to find out who did such a barbarous thing. Sid and Rachel immediately hit it off, and he takes the job. What he can't anticipate, however, is how bitter the truth will be or how much courage he will need to bring the criminal to justice. Francis has perfectly blended Sid's tenderness with icy toughness, his daring with sensitivity, and his fierce loyalty with an even fiercer sense of justice. Meanwhile, the plot gallops ahead in heart-stopping action scenes to a proud place in the winner's circle.

Bestselling authors of legal thrillers: move over for Lisa Scottoline. Her first two books earned Edgar nominations; now there's **Running from the Law** (HarperCollins, \$20), and it sizzles. It's sassy and sexy, sad and hilarious. It's chock-full of characters the likes of whom you've met, and not a few whom you'd kill to know better. Finally there's Rita Morrone herself, a poker-playing, tough-talking attorney with a canny nose for the truth, a generous sense of humor, and a huge heart only thinly cloaked by her power suits. Morrone rarely folds a hand and always plays to win. Play she does, even when the stakes turn deadly.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The September Mysterious Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; Raymond McGlynn of Los Angeles; Rolling Hills Estates, California; Austin Peterson of Evanston, Illinois; Carol Shaffer of Branson, Missouri; Lark Lucente of Virginia Beach, Virginia; R. Kent Williams of Richfield, Utah, and D. B. Hall of Minford, Ohio.

Photograph contest was won by tucky. Honorable mentions go to les, California; W.D. Long of H.R. Hopkinson of Upland, California, Wyoming; Don Porter of

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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## A PLACE IN THE LAKE by Lesa Neace

---

"Oooh! This is just gorgeous, Merv! Just as beautiful as something from the movies," Lorene gushed as she took her seat in the rowboat.

Merv grunted and pushed off from the bank.

"I know, I remember it now. *A Place in the Sun* with Montgomery Clift. Do you remember it?"

Merv muttered something unintelligible.

"Montgomery Clift had an affair with poor Shelley Winters and got her in the family way."

Merv unlocked an oar and took a swing at Lorene's head. Unaware, she ducked at the last second. The boat rocked as Merv missed.

"You ain't no Shelley Winters," he snarled.

"There he was, trapped by his own lustful ways; then he meets and falls for Elizabeth Taylor. So he takes Shelley out in a rowboat, and she drowns."

"You ain't no Elizabeth Taylor," he shouted and swung again. He missed, overbalanced, and fell into the lake. He sputtered up to the surface. Lorene looked down at him with a big smile.

"Then Raymond Burr catches him and sends him to the chair."

She whacked Merv with the remaining oar, and he sank like a rock and didn't come back up.

"And you ain't no Montgomery Clift."

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AH January '96

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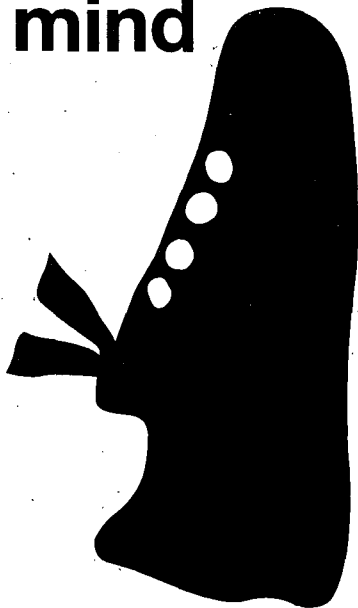
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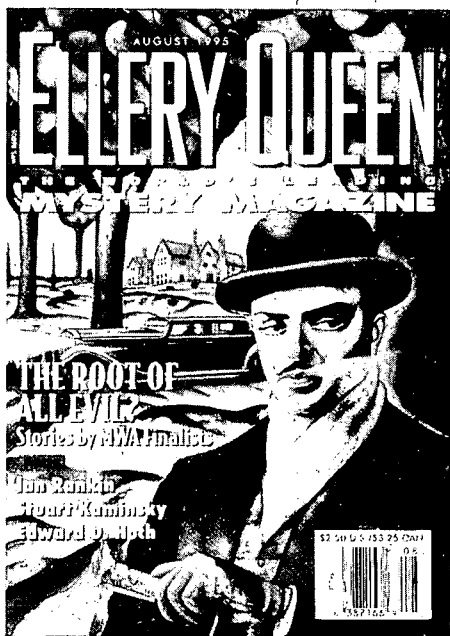


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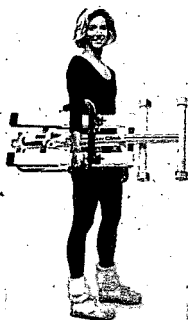
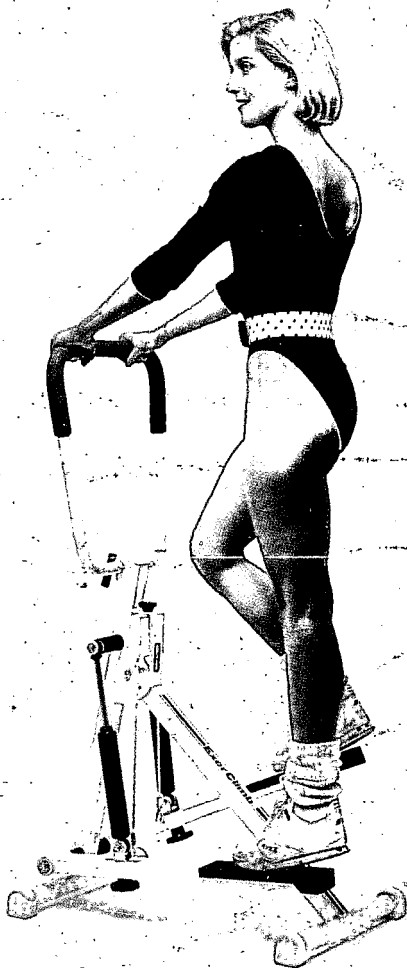
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